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# FINDING HOME

*J. Robin Whitley*

A PLACE TO BELONG

J. Robin Whitley

Finding Home

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J. Robin Whitley

*Illustrated by Jennifer Lynn*

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1-Fiction 2-LGBT

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# DEDICATION

In memory of my deddy, Buford Whitley.

*Thank you for reading this book!*

*Robin*

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

### **Acknowledgments**

The stories that follow are based upon the fiction of my own



mind. I would like to acknowledge however that the comic events of Beauregard are based upon true events or happenings of my “Deddy” (one of the North Carolina ways of saying ‘daddy’). He was a barber and frustrated inventor. He had odd things happen to him that I’ve written about as the antics of Beau. I hope you will enjoy his antics as you read the story. Beau’s relationships are fictional however. He and my mom were together until his death. When we were children and said we didn’t want to live in the city, Mom and Dad laughed, but stayed in the country that we loved. Mom encouraged me to be a writer when I was younger. All I could think about was being a musician. I am deeply grateful to all the dear friends who helped me work out the kinks in this first novel. Many thanks to Catherine Jones McClarin for her willingness to read the worst first drafts ever. Thanks also go to Wesley Satterwhite and Fran Sullivan-Fahs for their willingness to set aside time from our writer’s group to allow me to ask them questions about the story line or character development when I got stuck. Thanks to Barbara Clanton, Cathy Rowlands, and Connie Fazzio for being willing to read the rewrite and give me vital feedback. Linda North gave me some good tips on grammar and form. I couldn’t implement the all. When you find mistakes, they are all mine. The other important groups of people to acknowledge are the

fine folk who create and live in our rural communities. My life experience has shown known them as hard-working, loving, and trustworthy. It has also been my blessing to live in and be part of rural communities where people accepted me, even when they knew I was different.

*Solo Dei Gloria*

J. Robin Whitley

# Introduction

## The Piedmont

The writer of this here book asked me to tell you about some things to get this book to rollin'. First of all, I want y'all to remember, I ain't no writer. I'm from the country though, and I can tell some tales. Who else better than a local to tell somebody about a place in the South?

Writers like to dress places up and make 'em places all nice and purty.

If you want to know the truth, ask the country folk. They'll tell you right. If nothin' else, they're filled with enough fire and brimstone preachin' to make sure to tell the truth. I also told the writer not to correct the spellin' on her computer for my part. When she read it back to me the first time, it sounded like some city slicker.

Now the Piedmont begins n'ar about thirty to forty minutes East/Northeast of Charlotte. It's according to whar ya goin' really. We lived between Cabarrus and Stanly Counties most of our lives, hardly ever travelin' anywhar. If we did, we always took highway forty-nine to Charlotte or Asheboro. Sometimes we went to camp in the Uwharrie National Forest. Mountaineers would say that ole range looks more like hills than mountains. Still, the Uwharries are older than the Blue Ridge Mountains. Anyhow, once you leave the city on highway forty-

nine, there are miles and miles of farmland. Many would say miles and miles of nothin', but to country folk, those are miles and miles of heaven. Purty rollin' farmland and pastures that make you dream. So, that there tells you about the where of this story. Now, what else did she want me to tell ya? Oh yeah, just a bit about when the story happened.

Bill Clinton was president and it was before folks were tryin' to impeach 'im. Now that was quite a time. That's when me and Nannie decided to move closer to the city. We moved in the summer too and ooh-wee, the summer of 1997 was a hot one. Okay, so all summers in the South are hot. How hot it feels to a person is accordin' to how much stress life gives, or if you got hay to bale or fields to plow. At about 480 feet elevation, the Piedmont is a hot box of humidity in the summer and breezes rarely blow. You got to remember, west of here,

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the Blue Ridge Mountains are 5,000 feet or higher in comparison. That's why we're called the foothills. Now, some consider the Piedmont over near Raleigh, but the folks I grew up saw that as just another big ole city. The Piedmont means foothills and Raleigh is not near the foothills of anywhar I can tell. Maybe Raleigh's near the

foothills of the Uwharries, but like I said, they ain't that big.

Anyways, I'm getting off the story and now the writer tells me I'm in the wrong season. Still, you cain't know how good it feels in a Piedmont fall unless you know how hot the summers get. Some folks that cuss say it's hotter than H-E- double L, or Hades. Every day is like one natural steamer after another. My mama and deddy always got up at five o'clock in the mornin' to get their chores done before it got too hot. Then they would set on the porch after lunch drinkin' iced tea and fallin' asleep in the rockers. By August, the dawg days made it feel like summer would drag on forever. Ya couldn't wait till September came. Of course, while September cooled off some, the heat would still come around. Now that I think about it, September is a lot like a menopausal woman, a lot of hot flashes in between the cool spots. We couldn't wait till October, or better yet, November when it was sure to cool down a bit.

I cain't remember 'xactly what was popular in country music in 1997.

I liked "All My Exes Live In Texas" by George Strait. Don't tell my wife though. She thinks it encourages the sin of d-i-v-o-r-c-e. I cain't rightly recollect exact years of songs, so that might be wrong. It was hard to listen to the radio on my combine much when I was in the fields. Nannie only wanted to play gospel on the old radio when I was

in the house. As you can tell, I might wear the pants in the house, but I ain't the one in charge. She's a good woman though. Neither one of us likes that bumpy jumpy music.

The story this here writer is about to tell you is set in the country. She hopes that by reading my introduction, you can get a sense of how most ever'body tawks. Those that went to college might try and tawk more formal. There are always country folk that try to act like they're somethin' they ain't. Maddie wadn't like that. She could talk with the city slickers and then just as easy fall back into the brogue of Pleasant Quarry. She's proof that just because a young'un got education, there's

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no need to get on a high horse or get to big for your britches! There's one more thing to remember. In 1997, it was still a bit dangerous in the rural areas of the South to admit you might be a homosexual (most often pronounced homo-SECT-ual in that time) if you lived in the country. The KKK could still sneak into the areas with all the country back roads. In fact, we heard them hollerin' over the hill behind our house one night. There were a few people you could talk to and be honest about your life, but you had to be very careful. Me and Nannie got tired of that secrecy and fear, so we finally up and moved to the

city when we retired. It's easier to hide here. We still miss the country though: those beautiful mornings with the birds sangin' or the sound of rain on the old tin roof. You can take the women out of the country, but you really cain't take the country out of the women.

*"Perhaps there are those who are able to go about their lives unfettered by such concerns. But for*

*those like us, our fate is to face the world as orphans, chasing through long years the shadows of*

*vanished parents. There is nothing for it but to try and see through our missions to the end, as best*

*we can, for until we do so, we will be permitted no calm."*

~ Kazuo Ishiguro, **When We Were Orphans**

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## 1 CHARACTERS

### **Madsen**

A brilliant palette of colors washed across the horizon of the sky. Earth and wood scents rose from the ground like incense rising in prayer. Fall finally woke up with the chill of winter and there was a sense of excitement in the late November air. Madsen loved nature as though it was a part of her own body. Each leaf of the tree was a word of love, each particle of soil a kiss to her feet. Walking the land was her peace, her prayer. Her log home was almost complete. All that

remained was to hang the art. She thought that the building of the new house would also be her own completion. With it finished, she had achieved all of her goals in life. Instead, she felt a longing for something more.

She bent down and rubbed the rich soil of the fallow field between her hands. Although the ground was hardening from the cold, the soil was so rich that in the warmth of her hand, it melted like fudge. She liked the feel of the soil and held it up to smell its woody, earthy fragrance. She had seen her grandfather do this many times as he evaluated the ground's potential for a new crop. "This will be good for gardening," she thought. She heard the hoof beat of her horse approaching the fence. Lightning was always there for her. He always seemed to sense when she needed a friend. Today, she wished for more companionship than a horse could give. On a whim, Madsen decided to accept her friends' invitation to go dancing in the city. She went into the house to get ready.

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**Leah**

Morning arrived like a hangover. Everything was too noisy.

The city streets screamed with the pain of a city in the morning. In the



movies, the duller morning seemed glorious and full of hope – or at least the morning had good lighting. This day appeared to be like the rest of her mornings. There was no glory, not even sunshine, and a feeling of no hope. Leah kept trying to find the bright side of life, but circumstance always seemed to put a dimmer on everything, well at least on the hope of love. She had given up on hope long ago, and especially the hope of extra sleep. The cat, Ms. Cookies, was determined that rising time was six thirty sharp. Without fail, Ms. Cookies chose to sharpen her claws on the red door of Leah's bedroom each morning. The sound shrilled through the morning like awakening to the sound of fingernails scraping across a blackboard. Now it was time. Time to get up and start the routine. Time to get up and live the life that was not hers.

Scuffling to the kitchen, Ms. Cookies talked to her, giving orders for breakfast, asking for treats and a clean litter box. Leah wished the cat would let her sleep in on Saturdays and Sundays. Then Leah remembered that her dad had encouraged her to go out with his co-worker, Jonnie and her partner. She was a bit excited about making new friends in the city, so it was a good thing she was awake and moving. She could clean up the apartment a bit. She didn't know whether to be excited or afraid; it had been so long since she had gone

out. Work took all of her time and music was all of her dreams.

Her last relationship had threatened to wreck her career.

Leah tended to choose lovers who were sexy, smart, and controlling.

Her last relationship was more like a prison sentence than a relationship. It's why she felt off-track as though she was living someone else's life. She no longer knew what she wanted and sometimes wondered who she was. Leah stared at her counter in a daze until Ms. Cookies rubbed against her legs reminding her of the morning tasks at hand. As she bent to pet the cat, Leah pulled her long hair out of her face, and slipped it behind her ear.

"Ms. Cookies, I promise that tonight there will be nothing but dancing. I will be a good mama and not bring a stranger home."

Leah was hugging the cat...or trying to anyway. Ms. Cookies jumped out of her arms, twirled at Leah's feet and cried louder. Laughing, Leah

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stood and walked to the pantry. "I know, I know. Feed the cat. That's all I'm good for, right?" The cat purred in agreement.

Before she knew it, the day had flown by, but she still needed groceries. Maybe she should skip going out. She didn't really know Jonnie. Then she thought about how her ex had ruined her life and friendships. Those friendships had little depth, but still there were

others to hang out with and lately she'd been spending too much time with her parents. In her indecision, she began to bite at her fingers. She looked at the clock, thinking about how long she would need to get ready. "What will it hurt?" she muttered to herself. She grabbed her purse and keys, then dashed down the stairway to her car. At least it was only a few blocks to the Fresh Market. She could get groceries and return with enough time to eat supper before getting ready to go out.

The sun was setting earlier each day. By the time Leah had stepped out to her car, dusk was falling. She enjoyed the hues of the sky as she drove. The traffic was light for a change. She wondered where everyone was on a Saturday night, then remembered there was a Panther's game downtown. She found a parking spot closer to the store than usual. She pulled into the space, and watched the colors of the sky change before getting out. As she started to the store she realized she had forgotten her jacket. After locking her door, she raced toward the store faster to warm up.

As she approached the store's door, cigarette smoke wrapped around her like a bad dream. At least it was a bad dream for her. Leah looked for the smoker and saw a woman leaning on the wall right at the door. Wisps of smoke still curled about her head as though she was a witch from another time and place. If the woman was an

employee, she was going to complain to the manager. What's the point of having a smoke-free environment if a customer must walk by a smoker to get into the store? Leah's indignation was immediate. She was still annoyed when upon closer inspection, she saw that the smoker was not an employee. She watched the smoker in hopes to catch her eye and to give her the evil eye. The woman did look at her, then smiled and winked. Leah's heart fluttered a bit because the smoker's eyes were beautiful, and in another quick glance, she saw the woman was muscular. As Leah entered the store, she wished the woman hadn't been a smoker. "What a waste of a fine-looking woman," she thought.

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She tested a few carts until she found one that rolled smoothly. She could still smell the smoke from outside. Determined not to look again, she started towards the produce section. One of the things Leah loved about the Fresh Market was that she could actually smell the scent of the fruit. She took a deep breath to clear her head of the smell of cigarette smoke. The scent of the fruit rose as a lullaby to her nose, old-time aromatherapy. The first scent she caught was that of the apples. She reached out touch them, feel the firmness. Her

favorite apples, honey crisps, were in season and she felt she could see the freshness, though she knew that it was the color of all the apples that also astounded her. The greens and yellows of the vegetables also painted a tangible portrait of food for her body as well as her soul. She often found herself dwelling on the beauty of the produce section when she got home. She would bite into a fresh apple, close her eyes, and revisit the picture of life in the fresh food as she tasted the juicy flesh of fruit.

Into this pleasing reverie walked the smokestack. The woman walked up to her like an old friend, acting as familiar with her as Leah's seven-year-old cat. Leah would swear that if the woman had had a tail, it would have wrapped around her leg. Leah ignored her and moved further into the grocery store although she had not picked out enough vegetables for the week. She had heard that the market was often a pick-up place for tamer individuals. She wasn't buying it...though she had to admit, it was safer than picking up someone in a bar. Leah spooked herself, looked over her shoulder and found that the woman had backed off and was shopping just like her. She breathed a sigh of relief. She decided to skip the bar. She had had enough drama in her last relationship to last a lifetime.

Arriving at the bar at ten, Maddie realized how long it had been since she had gone out after nine. The fatigue of the day covered her. Walking into Skippers, the smoke wove itself into the wool of her jacket like a thread of hazy gray. She looked into the darkness and knew that its smell would follow her home like a scroungy, stray dog. It would follow her home, assault her senses, and remind her of where she had been – or where she had not been. She had not been to church.

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She had not been home, but to some bar on the outer realms of the city. She was looking for a woman. The smoke continued to embrace her as her eyes adjusted to the stinging darkness. Her friends had not arrived yet, and there was no one present that she knew. Too much time had passed since she last frequented a bar; yet, she was looking for someone to love. She was finally tired of being alone. Her search led her further into the bar and she realized she was beginning her search in earnest, but the person she wanted would probably not be in a bar. Somehow, though, she had to find her.

There was a commotion near the door and she turned to see some euphoric drag queens enter. Behind the group, she saw her friends. Soon, her friend Jonnie came up and hugged her. Jonnie and PJ were in town to catch up with some friends and be present at

Maddie's House Blessing on Sunday. Surrounded by friends from college, everyone took the time to catch up on whose partner was new to the group. The music boomed louder and the younger women began to dance.

As Maddie, Jonnie and PJ found a table she could tell Jonnie was pumped up about something. Maddie smiled and asked "So what's up?" Grinning, Jonnie responded "We set you up with the coworker of PJ's who lives in Charlotte. Her name is Leah. She and some others are on their way tonight, but running a little late. She's a real hottie and she likes to read." Jonnie laughed because she knew Maddie would approve of a woman with a love of books and good literature.

"I don't know, Jonnie." Maddie was a little pissed that they were trying to set her up, but also a little interested.

"Aw come on, if you don't like her, you can go dance with one of the wall flowers over there."

"Okay but if she's a crazy woman I'll get you for this. Alright PJ, tell me about her."

"First of all, she's not a co-worker, but the daughter of the architect for our new company headquarters."

"Yah, yah, yah." Jonnie interrupted "What difference does it make PJ? She knows you."

“Just want Maddie to know I don’t know her that well.” PJ turned back to Maddie. “She’s a music professor somewhere. Her dad’s not only proud of her as a musician but when one of the

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managers asked if she was married, he spoke up and said she wasn’t in a relationship since her partner left her.”

“Yeah, but that could have been a man. We all know that.”

“Except that Bill has no tact and is also nosy. He asked if ‘her husband or boyfriend’ was really out of the picture. Bill had been to the architect’s office and saw a picture of her. Had seen earlier that she was beautiful.”

“Okay, what else?”

“Nothing really.” PJ looked sheepish. “You’ve got to start meeting women again somehow.”

“Not like this. How did you even invite her here if you’ve not met her?”

“Tomas, her dad, came over to the house for dinner after our meeting. We all had a great time. Jonnie told him we were going to be in Charlotte so we could attend your House Blessing. She’s also a church person, and he knows me. He thought it was safe.”



“You’ve never met this woman. Do you even know her name?”

“Of course I do. It’s Leah.”

“How long have you known her dad?”

“Only talked with him the past six months, but this was the first time he came to the house. Before that it was in the conference room and strictly business. He had to stay an extra night in town the last time he was in so we had him over.”

“Listen guys,” Maddie laughed and shook her head “I love you and I often trust you. I can’t do this tonight.”

“Aw come on.” Jonnie spoke from her this-is-ridiculous voice.

“No way. I’ve been through too much with others and I’m just recovering enough to get my own house.” Maddie stood up to leave and took a sip of water. “Come on over to the house any time you feel like it on Sunday. You can always nap in my guest room. You can come over tonight if you want.”

“We want some time in the big city tonight.” PJ smiled at Jonnie “It’s been a long time since we got away from small town USA.”

“Okay, see ya.” Maddie left without hugging either of them goodbye.

## 2 ADVENT

### **Advent**

*Advent – Season of the church year full of watching and waiting in expectation of the things to come. Originally, it was a penitential season as somber as Lent: fasting and repentance once a major theme. Throughout the years, Advent has become a season of looking for the kingdom where all of creation will be redeemed and the glory of the Lord will be revealed to all people. The season is still one of watching and waiting in hopeful expectation.*

### **Pearl**

Clinking glasses sounded like small bells begging for service. The sticky air of the restaurant made it feel like mid-August even in the cold of late November. December was still a day away, but it felt like winter already and the Christmas season even closer. The rush of the shoppers preparing for their holiday meant one thing; she might make enough money to have heat all winter. Thank fate for the kerosene heater. She once would have thanked God, but everyone talked about a loving God who provided for every need and lifted the broken-hearted. After all her years of praying to that God, she was still poor and downhearted. It was less disappointing to believe that fate guided life.

At least it would not give the impression that you had some control over the events of life. You do what you have to do. You take things as they come, and if fate chooses, then you might be okay. If not, then you might live a life like Pearl's.

Pearl was born in the country on a small farm outside of Pleasant Quarry. She lived with hopes of making it to the big city one day. She had even gone to community college to obtain a degree in culinary arts. The farthest away she had moved however, was only five miles from her home place. Even then, it had taken her most of her life to get there. She lived out the past fifty years doing what her parents told her to do and it had been a hard existence. Since she was an only child, her

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parents never wanted her to marry or move away or do anything other than milk the cow, feed the chickens, and help mama with supper. Of course, this meant that she had no social life and little experience with a job outside of the farm. When both parents died in the same year, it was overwhelming. After she got them buried, the town accountant told her that she would have to sell the farm to pay off her daddy's debt. She was devastated. That was when she decided to give up on God.

She didn't have much and even that was taken from her. After the debts were paid, enough remained for her to purchase a house trailer and a small seedy lot. She now owned a used, but decent singlewide trailer. She first hoped to have enough for a car, a used Ford Pinto, but her dad's old truck still ran and was the only thing that was debt-free. She hated that old truck, but she kept it. After all her hard work for her parents, she had a small home and an old Chevy pickup to keep her through the remainder of her life. All she had needed was a job. When Joe at the local diner gave her a job as sometimes a waitress and sometimes a cook, she knew she would at least have something to eat. Joe fed his help the meals they needed while working. During the Christmas season, waitresses really made the money. Today she had been a waitress and she was happy as she counted her tips again. She liked cooking the best, but waiting tables sometimes put more cash in her pocket. Either way, she was glad for work to keep her busy during the day. It had been a long time since she had worked for pay. It was nice to have her own money. For the first night in a long time, she was going to sleep easy.

### 3 THE MEETING

Maddie had just gotten to her Jeep when she heard her named yelled across the parking lot. She tensed up hoping that there wasn't a mugger

nearby. The parking lot at Skipper's was often a dangerous place at night. She looked quickly around her, ready for a fight but there was no one there. When she saw Jonnie smiling and signaling to wait, she was relieved. "What's up?"

Jonnie grabbed her arm gleefully "Come on. Got someone I want you to meet."

"Jonnie, you know I don't want to be set up with a stranger."

"Well she can't be any stranger than your last choice. Besides, if you meet her and talk, then she won't be a stranger anymore. Come on I tell you. She's a classical pianist. If nothing else, you'll love her music."

Jonnie grabbed her arm and began directing Maddie back to the bar.

Maddie faked a groan of despair, but was secretly curious about the big deal. She wanted to see for herself if this woman was someone worth her time. Jonnie pulled her through the crowded dance floor to the back of the bar. PJ was talking to some brunette who had to be Leah.

Leah's back was to Maddie when Maddie changed her mind. She wasn't ready to take a chance again. She pulled her arm away from Jonnie. Jonnie turned back quickly, but Maddie stood firm. "Listen, I'll meet her, but then I'm immediately going home. You guys have had your fun. Being in the bar is hard enough since I stopped drinking. This is jumping on my last nerve."

“Okay, okay.” Jonnie put up her hands in surrender and then spoke compassionately. “We weren’t thinking when we chose a bar. Just say

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hello and then we’ll walk you back out. I noticed there were some scary characters hiding in the shadows.”

As the two started back to PJ’s table, Leah turned around and offered her hand. “Hi, you must be Jonnie?”

“Yep, and this is my friend Madsen.”

Leah offered her hand to Maddie and then looked straight into Maddie’s eyes. Her heart leapt. Her brain went numb. Maddie thought to herself a phrase that would later haunt her “I know the minute I saw her I felt like I’d come home.” Maddie gently accepted Leah’s hand and nodded hello and gave a sweet smile.

“You can call me Maddie,” Madsen said “of course some days you’ll just call me Mad.” The college group laughed at the old joke. Leah raised her eyebrows. Suddenly, Maddie felt stupid.

“Come on and sit down.” PJ scooted to the center of the booth and pulled Jonnie around beside her. As Jonnie cozied up to PJ she asked “Where are the others?”

“Half of them are making the rounds to see who is here tonight. The

other half are at the bar.”

There was an awkward moment as Maddie stood in place, trying to decide whether to stay or go. Once PJ and Jonnie were settled into a place, they both looked at Maddie with pleading eyes. “Just stay a few minutes to chat Maddie. We won’t keep you too long.”

Maddie sat down on the edge of the booth looking like she was ready to run. She was nervous and she was glad she had picked up a pack of cigarettes just in case the nerves set in. It would be easier to set the cigarettes aside later than if she started drinking again. She patted her coat pocket to make sure the cigarettes were ready, then decided to hang it on the back of the chair. Maybe she could stay a while. She looked across the table at Leah and saw that her green eyes sparkled. Shit. She was caught in a difficult situation. When she thought that, her

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mind quickly created the image of her and Leah pressed up against a wall in a passionate embrace. Maddie shook her head to clear her mind. “You okay?” Leah tilted her head a little as she spoke kindly. Her soft smile melted Maddie’s brain.

“Yeah. Just got a lot on my mind.”

“Leah, Maddie is a potter. Her work has been shown around the

nation.” Jonnie glowed with mischief as she spoke.

“Really? I love pottery. Where did you study?”

“My undergraduate program was at Rowan University and my MFA from the University of Washington. My main inspiration came however when I attended Penland School of Crafts and then The John C. Campbell Folk School. I taught at Warren Wilson college for a couple of years.”

“That’s quite some vitae.” Leah smiled and seemed genuinely pleased.

“How about you? I hear you’re a musician?” Maddie prayed that she wasn’t blushing.

“Yes, I’m a pianist and vocalist mainly. Started at NC School of the Arts, then Julliard, then Manhattan School of the Arts. I’ve been hired to assist with a new arts school we hope will take off near Rowan University in Misenheimer. Is that where you went to college or the Charlotte Campus?”

“Me and Jonnie went to college at the campus in Misenheimer. That’s how we became friends.”

A big whoop went up as they all heard “MAD-Woman! Is that you?”

Maddie turned to see Becca. Before she could stand up and greet the old acquaintance, Becca sat on her lap and kissed her while holding her Tom Collins. “Whoa! Dropped a little of Tom on you, but I know you



won't mind. Lord, you're cuter than ever!" She winked and put on her vixen face. Maddie could tell that Jonnie and PJ were as horrified as she that Becca stopped by. She didn't even want to look at Leah.

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"Hey, Becca." Maddie began helping the inebriated woman to stand up. Maddie stood up too hoping to find someone else to handle Becca. "Looks like you need to go home already." Maddie spoke firmly and did not smile.

"Oh, come on baby. It's been such a long time since I seen you here." Becca leaned in to kiss Maddie again. Maddie moved her head back where Becca couldn't kiss her. "Go home." Maddie prodded her away from the table. Becca laughed as she turned, then called out to another woman across the dance floor and ran to sit on that lap. Maddie was disappointed and disgusted. Disgusted that she ever hooked up with Becca and disappointed because she figured that all was wrecked with the blind date. She was going home. She turned on her heels back to the table.

PJ, Jonnie, and Leah were talking as Maddie returned. She knew that PJ and Jonnie would smoothen things over somehow, but Maddie knew she had to get out of the bar. "Hey. Hate that happened." Maddie

grabbed her coat off the chair and twisted in her hands as though choking it. "I'm going to head on home. Nice to meet you Leah."

"Aw, stay Maddie. You don't have to let that wench wreck your evening." Maddie could see that Jonnie was furious.

"No. I need to get back. My horse wants me up at dawn anyway. Again, nice to meet you Leah." Maddie pointed to PJ and Jonnie "See you two on Sunday," then turned to go. As she walked away she put on her coat, grabbed her cigarette pack and lighter. Just as she lit one, she felt a tap on her shoulder. It was Leah.

"Mind if I walk you to your car?" Leah pulled her coat on and slipped her hands into the pockets.

"I'll be alright." Maddie took a big drag on the cigarette and blew the smoke behind her, away from Leah's face. "Don't want you to walk back in by yourself. Oh hell. I'm not starting this again." Maddie dropped the cigarette on the ground and stomped it out then threw the butt and the rest of the cigarettes away. "What a nasty habit. Took

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forever for me to quit." Maddie put her hands in the pockets of her coat, not knowing what to do.

About that time, PJ walked up and heard Maddie. "How about we all

walk out for a breath of air. Gotta let Jonnie cool off a bit. Leah I mentioned to your friends that we were walking Maddie out.”

“God, do I look helpless?” Maddie was a bit offended. She had a black belt in Tae Kwan Do and knew how to take care of herself. Besides, she was mad enough at Becca that she could have handled anyone. At least that’s how she felt...along with wanting to escape an embarrassing episode of drama. She stalked off, but she could see PJ and Leah following. She barreled through the dancers, a steam locomotor going through the crowd. When she got outside the door, she stopped to wait for them. No need in being rude on top of it all. She leaned against the outside wall waiting for them to catch up, silently fuming at Becca all the while.

PJ soon opened the door, stepped aside to let Leah walk out first.

Maddie could hear her talking with Leah “Thanks for coming with me for a moment. I feel I need to apologize to you both for the evening.”

Maddie looked up at the light pollution wishing for a star. She felt like a jerk for stalking off. Pushing off the wall she said,

“Don’t worry man. It couldn’t be helped. I forgot Becca always hangs out here.”

“Well, we had hoped we could all dance; nothing else but friendship and dancing.”

Leah laughed “You really think there would be no drama at a gay bar?”

She smiled in mirth and they all laughed at the truth.

“What can I say?” PJ shrugged. “My sweetheart loves to boogie and all that happens in our New Bern are square dances.” PJ smiled a big smile of love for Jonnie. Maddie knew as well as PJ how much Jonnie loved to dance. Maddie punched PJ on the shoulder.

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“You better get in there and dance then! You can see my Jeep from here, so no need to walk all that way.” She hugged PJ for good measure. Leah looked awkward and Maddie didn’t know whether to hug her or run away.

“May I still walk with you for a moment Maddie?”

“Sure.” Maddie looked down at Leah’s shoes. “Um...I’m parked on the side of the ditch. Doubt it will be easy to walk in those heels.” Leah then put her hand through Maddie’s bent arm pulling her away. Maddie looked back at a grinning PJ and waved with her left hand.

“Where are you heading now?” Leah’s voice was curious, but not prying.

“Probably back home. Might stop to get a bite to eat because nothing will be open there.”

Leah looked at her watch “But it’s only 9:30.”

Maddie chuckled “That’s late for the farming community where I live.

Everything closes at eight or nine.”

The two walked slow and quiet, trying to make the distance longer than it was to the Jeep.

“You know, this is nice.”

“What?” Maddie got the keys out of her jacket. They were at her Jeep.

She reached to unlock the door, sad that she had to let go of Leah.

There was a wistfulness about them. Maddie changed her mind and leaned on the door, facing Leah.

“Being able to walk quietly with someone.” Leah folded her arms against her chest, shivering. “Give me a ride back to the door. Dang it’s cold out here!” She high-heeled her way to the passenger door. As she got in, Maddie laughed.

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“You’re pretty good in those shoes!”

“I know!” Leah shimmied her shoulders and her eyes were flirting.

Maddie backed up slowly, but the washed-out road was so bumpy they were both jostled silly. As Maddie put the gear into first, Leah spoke.

“Wait. I have an idea.” She put her hand on Maddie’s to encourage her

to stop. “I don’t live that far from here. Why don’t you come over to my house and we’ll have coffee? We could pick up some donuts or a burger on the way. I just bought groceries, though you don’t want me cooking for you. What do you think?”

Maddie’s heart was racing while the Jeep idled. “I am hungry. We could stop by the grocery and I’ll cook something up.”

“Oh, don’t bother. I have plenty. I think you can find something. Take me to the door so I can go tell my friends you’re taking me home. The bar has always been too noisy for me...even though I love to dance too!”

While Maddie waited for Leah’s return, she felt giddy and panicky all at one time. Was this smart to do? Well, she doesn’t seem like a murderer. Was she lucky? Was she going to get lucky? Whoa, she thought. Hold them horses. She took some deep breaths but still felt anxious. She turned the heater on high and opened the door as Leah came sauntering out. Maddie’s heart was thundering.

### **Journal Entry – Leah**

Saturday Morning

*After spending the hours talking last night, I decided early in the conversation that the strong name suited Maddie well. She spoke with authority, though not in a threatening manner. Despite myself, this smoky woman charmed me. Her voice*

*reached down into the caverns of my soul and echoed there. I found myself fighting*

*feelings that were too threatening. How could I even consider dating a smoker? That*

*was the last thing I needed with my asthma. I already push my luck by living with a cat. I don't need to live with any other creature that's going to cause health problems. Besides, I just met her.*

*I was relieved when she offered to cook. While I can cook, it never fails that I always ruin a meal when trying to impress someone. I can't explain why I didn't*

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*cook for her. It was not my goal to impress her. Returning to the peaceful quiet of my home and the company of my cat was my first goal. I'm surprised that I did not*

*find a way to leave her at the bar. Now I wish I had. It would have been easier to avoid her if I had not talked and spent time with her. Now she's been in my home, cooked a great meal, made me laugh and charmed my cat out of my life. I'm glad*

*she lives in another town.*

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4 THINKING ABOUT ANOTHER

"Today, we'll talk about scales using the Aeolian mode." As Leah said

the words, they seemed foreign. She was the professor and yet, today it was as if she was thinking and speaking in a foreign tongue. If she was confused, she was sure the students' minds were befuddled. She decided to give a brief overview and then let the students leave early. She didn't want to be giving a study session anyway. She could cover progressions and more scales on Monday. None of the students would be heartbroken for the free time. Though, many of them needed the extra tutoring.

After the students left the classroom, she avoided her office to take a walk around campus. She didn't want to work on Saturday any more than she had to, although the campus was lovely and lively as the students worked on decorating the dorms. The campus was quaint and built in a style reminiscent of Old Williamsburg. In fact, it was the time of the year for the campus celebration called "Williamsburg Christmas." Students decorated each building by using materials from nature, but nothing artificial. Using fruit, pinecones and fir or cedar cuttings, they made beautiful wreaths and garlands that decked all the halls. The beauty of the decorations exhorted all to join in the festivity of Christmas, but also acknowledged the season of Advent. The smells of the fruit and pine reminded Leah of how much she loved creation. Growing up in the country had been her salvation as a lonely youth.



The country had always been a part of her soul. She loved how the wind blew through her heart and cleansed her. She loved the sound of the leaves rustling in the trees. The creak of the limbs once frightened her. Now it was like hearing the voice of a wise grandparent.

“Dr. Lewis,” cried a maintenance worker, interrupting her reverie.

She turned to see who called to her.

“Hewey, I’m only a professor, but thank you for the compliment.”

Leah was still unaccustomed to the prestige of teaching at the college level. Being a professor had always been a dream, but the reality, at times, was overwhelming. She was challenged mentally and emotionally by being the youngest professor on campus. She didn’t need to be distracted or involved in something to take her mind off her work. The last thing she needed was to be interested in a probable smoker. Leah knew that women often put on a good show. Then, just when you relax, they turn into devils who smoke, drink, and cheat on

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you. Lord! Leah thought to herself. I could write a country song for lesbians.

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Driving through the countryside, Maddie pondered how many

chickens she would need to have fresh eggs each day. She hoped to have a small working farm within a year. Her new neighbor had volunteered to assist her as she added wire fencing to make a chicken runway outside of the new barn. The man would be at her house that afternoon to deliver the chickens and she had to have the chicken wire ready. The fence built. Mentally she envisioned the area outside of her barn to figure out how much wire she would need. She hated that she to drive all the way into the city to purchase chicken wire. She wished she didn't have to drive to Charlotte, but she was avoiding her wicked ex who lived in Concord, and Ritchie's Hardware was out of the wire she needed. What made it worse was that she would have to go to Home Depot since it was the closest place.

Home Depot was not a bad store. They always had what she needed. The employees were hospitable; some were even openly gay. The problem was that it was so orange. Everything was painted orange and glowed like a square pumpkin on the hillside near the university. It seemed to scream orange. Walk into the store and the walls and carts yelled orange at you. Maddie hated orange. However, today she did not have time to go to the cool, blue Lowe's store. She had to finish the pen before the hens were delivered. As she walked into the store, she was struck with a feeling that something good was about to happen.

Usually her intuition was accurate in such matters. She thought jokingly

“I better not count my chickens before they’re hatched.”

“Madder!” She heard her named yelled from behind as she walked through the paint section. She turned to see her old friend sauntering up to her.

“Jeff, what are you doing here? Don’t tell me you’ve deserted Lowes.”

“Girl, I sure have. Found out that there were more family members working at this Home Depot. There’s comfort in numbers ya’ know? Also, thought it might be a way to meet some new guys. Whatcha lookin’ for?”

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“Need some chicken wire...” As Maddie rounded the corner, she bumped into a display that sent two boxes of pocket-hole screws to the concrete floor. As the boxes hit the ground, they exploded on impact sending several pounds of screws across the aisle. Some other customer had set the boxes that were shabbily wrapped, on the display. Bursting into laughter Jeff exclaimed “Looks like you came to Home Depot to get screwed.” They began to gather the screws and attempted to rebuild the boxes when a woman walked around the

corner and began babbling apologies. Still laughing from Jeff's pun, Maddie looked up and recognized that the woman was Leah and said with a smile "We've got to stop meeting like this."

"How embarrassing," Leah whispered as she blushed. "I thought that nothing would happen in the short time that it would take me to look at a few household items. Those boxes can be so awkward and who would have ever thought they would fall open like that?" Leah's hands were full with string and twine, leaving Maddie wondering why she hadn't picked up one of those orange baskets at the very least.

"I hope you don't take this personally," said Maddie "but why do you need this many screws?"

"Yeah," said Jeff "one would be good for me."

Maddie punched him in the arm. In the presence of Leah was not the time to have a campy queen adding colorful commentary to the conversation.

Leah flushed, answering "I'm picking up some things for the school's Christmas decorations and the maintenance department asked me to get these too. I should have gotten a cart. I guess I've been a little scatterbrained lately." As soon as she had spoken, Leah hoped that she had not betrayed her nervousness at being in Maddie's presence.

Neither did she want to appear mindless as she met her again. Standing

near Madsen, she could smell that her scent was fresh like lavender soap and her heart beat a little faster. Leah knew she was in trouble if Maddie's scent mesmerized her. She closed her eyes, and took another deep breath as she bent to help clean up the mess.

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Maddie did not remember anything about that afternoon except that Leah had smiled at her and that she was so beautiful. In a moment,

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Leah had let her guard down showing her heart and kindness in a simple, yet dazzling smile. Also, Jonnie had been right. Leah was hot. Maddie did not know how she could feel so much for someone who was mostly a stranger, but she did. That is why she invited Leah to her House Blessing after walking her to her car. That could be a safe place to possibly begin a deeper relationship and let Leah see her spiritual side. There would be other people around and most of them were religious in some way or another. She also wanted Leah to come by her own home and see that she didn't smoke. Leah agreed to think about it and for that reason, Maddie was hopeful. As she pulled into her driveway, she looked at the neighbor's truck and it was not until that moment, with a truck full of chickens in her yard and a helpful

neighbor, that Maddie remembered the chicken wire. She pounded her steering wheel. She knew that she was forgetting something.

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## 5 WHO BELIEVES IN LOVE?

Leah looked at the diagram of the circle of fifths lying on her desk as she struggled to prepare a lesson plan. Her mind lingered on the encounter with Maddie at the Home Depot. “I’ve got to get that woman off my mind,” Leah thought. She tried to concentrate on how best to convey the importance of music theory to her students. She considered using Walter Piston’s book on theory and yet, it was so dry that the words alone seemed to kill the life in music. Opting for a visual way of learning, she began to draw the circle of fifths on a poster board with bright and varied colors showing the sharps and flats of each key signature. As she taught, she could then play through each transposition on the piano so that the students would be learning through three different modes: sight, sound, and experience. Some of her piano students would be able to play them for their classmates and hopefully reinforce how the transpositions happened. Maybe that would keep the lesson alive.

She began work on drawing a perfect circle and found that the action of drawing calmed her restless inner voices. Often, when

drawing doodles, she drew various types of circles and spirals; circles that spiraled and connected to other circles or forming cones. She liked the feminine aspect of the circle and the curved line. She often wondered if her love of circles connected to the cyclical patterns of life. Somehow, it seemed that circles represented life and its cycles, life and its patterns. The season moved in cycles. Living things grew in cycles. Atoms and their components moved in cycles and circles. Leah drew the circle very slowly. Concentrating on each movement of the line drawing focused her on something other than her emotions. She wished she had time to put aside the lesson plan and simply draw. Finally, her circle was complete. As she stepped back, she saw that without compass or stencil she had drawn a well-balanced circle. Now it was time to add the components that gave this part of theory its name, the circle of fifths.

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Leah had always liked the number five. She once heard that it was a number symbolic of love. She was not sure that it applied to music theory however. There was never any love when it came to Leah and music theory. She loved music for how it touched the soul and moved the heart. Until her undergraduate studies, she had never

thought of music as an academic exercise. She struggled with preparing a lesson that would both teach the students and feed their need for the sound of music. Moving the mind to interact with the heart, and the heart to embrace the mind was always a balancing act. Perhaps that was something she should learn about love, how to get the mind to interact with the heart and not run recklessly into love the first person who moved her. No matter how hard she tried, she could not focus on the lesson plan. She was in a new job, she had no time for love. Her last relationship was a disaster, and her heart felt barely strong enough to think about loving again. Perhaps all she needed was a milkshake from the Dairy Queen. If nothing else, the busyness of the city would distract her from these raging feelings.

Who needs love anyway?

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## 6 BEAU MEETS THE DOG

“Dang-blasted dog,” he hollered. “Now who’s gonna believe that my car was wrecked by a dog? That’s what I get fer comin’ to Concord when I’m in a rush.” He mumbled to himself as he replayed in his mind the event that had just occurred. He was taking a short cut to Wal-Mart through a residential neighborhood. He never drove over the speed limit, so he was not going fast. Even then, he stopped when he saw the



large Saint Bernard in the road. The big, lumbering animal looked up at that old, red, Gran Torino and charged right into Beau's front-end. The dog charged like a bull in a bullring; busted the grill as if Beau's car had been hit by a bull too. Then the dog ran off. Beau looked around to see if by any chance a neighbor had witnessed what had happened. There was no one. He muttered to himself. "I hope my insurance company believes this. I gotta get to work too."

Beauregard was a barber by trade, but an inventor by aspiration.

The entire town of Pleasant Quarry called him Beau. Most of the men shook their heads at Beau's crazy ideas and then would joke with him about his "inventions." This time Beau decided to build a car. He could see the car in his mind and had already purchased an old Volkswagen Beetle frame. All he needed was the right materials to develop the body of the car. He was sure that the new Wal-Mart would have what he needed. They had everything. His head filled with dreaming of his new car as he pulled his winter cap down further over his ears and drove away from the scene of the accident. "Derned old dog."

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7 INVITATION TO HOUSE BLESSING

**House Blessing**

*A rite to invoke God's blessing on the inhabitants of a dwelling and to celebrate the various aspects of family life as a new beginning in a new place. Not a rite to mark off and identify sacred space. Doors marked with the chalk dates of blessing*

*are a way of declaring welcome to one's home. Often associated with the coming of*

*the Wise Men to visit the home of the King of Kings.*

Commentary on Occasional Services by Philip H. Pfatticher

Leah returned from grocery shopping, loaded with bags full of fresh fruit and vegetables. Her mesh bags stretched to their limits carrying the organically grown food and the recyclable cartons. As she opened the door to her small apartment, she looked at the rich, warm colors and thought of how blessed she was to have such a great place. The green of the plants' leaves sparkled with sunlight. The wooden floors gleamed with wax and told of years of thoughtful care. Her clock tick-tocked on the mantle and she breathed a sigh of joy. If only it were big enough for her piano, then it would be perfect.

She had never been invited to a House Blessing before. She was not sure what it was, but it sounded holy and sacred. She knew that her place had brought blessing, but had never thought about blessing it in return. The apartment had been on her mind lately. She felt that something was missing. It was as if she had misplaced a book or moved

a picture to an inappropriate place. She kept looking for the missing piece, but it would not present itself or come to her mind. Perhaps her place wished to be blessed. It sounded like a strange thing to say, but something was calling to her.

She began to put away the groceries as she pondered why she felt dissatisfied while also loving the coziness of her apartment. She knew that the absence of her piano made her feel a bit lost. It was hard always going somewhere else to practice. After the groceries were put away, she sat down on the couch with her last cup of coffee. The best she could interpret was that home was calling to her. Somehow, home was

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calling out her name and she wanted to answer. She merely had to listen for the right question.

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Maddie's first experience with a House Blessing had been at the home of her friend who had been a nun. The ceremony spoke to her and acknowledged the goodness of owning one's own home. As she was putting the finishing touches on a roast for the meal, the doorbell rang. Dern, she didn't need anybody coming early. Who in the world could it be? Then she saw Jonnie and PJ's car out in the driveway and

knew it would be okay. When she opened the door, she got a cheery greeting from them both. PJ and Jonnie brought their luggage in and set it on the floor, then PJ followed Maddie back to the kitchen.

"What can we do to help?" PJ offered as she leaned on the kitchen island. Ever the engineer, she loved to help in any situation and if there was anything that needed to be repaired, PJ was the one to do it. She could make anything work better.

"How about checking that hinge out on my stable and the one on the back door. I've been so busy trying to get all my ducks in a row that I've not had time to go back and make sure they are tight."

Jonnie finally came into the kitchen too "Ducks? I thought you just bought chickens" Jonnie laughed as she handed Maddie a beautiful quilt with rainbow colors all over it. The pattern was one that looked like stars rather than arches. "It's what's called a 'friendship pattern' and I thought it would be a great house warming gift from us. Here, take it. I've got to go get the cake I baked from the truck."

"Wow this is gorgeous!"

"I know," said PJ "you should see the one she's working on for her sister. I'm going to go help her bring in the decorating equipment. She didn't want to decorate it until we were here. Then I'll go around the entire house making sure everything meets my approval. Can't have a

friend living in a house I've not inspected."

"Well I'll give you the official tour when the others get here, but I've got to finish in the kitchen right now. Make yourself at home."

As PJ went out the door, Maddie unfolded the quilt and spread it over the back of her leather couch. Every stitch had care and love put into it. She knew that her friendship with PJ and Jonnie was precious. She was thankful for their friendship. As she walked back to the

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kitchen, she also prayed that one day she would find an equal partner. She wanted a relationship like PJ and Jonnie's where there was love but also room to grow. Still, love seemed a mystery to Maddie. For now, she needed to get the meal started; the love of friends would have to do. She put the quilt on the back of her couch, then returned to the kitchen.

Jonnie brought in a large cake and set it on the green marble counter. "What now?"

"Could you finish getting the vegetables going in the extra crock pot? I'm supposed to go to mom's church for her service?"

"Now?"

"Yes. I promised."

"Doesn't she know about your House Blessing?"

"Well, no."

"Go on Maddie. You know I love to cook and I'm not that fond of your mom. My heart won't be broken if she's not here."

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8 PEARL AS SCROOGE?

"Oh, there's no place like home for the holidays...."

Pearl listened as Andy Williams sang the familiar tune. She was glad that Joe was not particularly religious. She did not think she could stand to hear those tunes about God becoming flesh as she faced this Christmas season alone again. It had been two years since the death of her parents, but this would be the first Christmas spent in the trailer park. How could time have passed so quickly? Time slips by when you're not watching and suddenly, one year turns into fifty. That is what happened when she began to care for her parents. Pearl's dreams had wasted away long ago; she did not remember the shape or weight of them. She once wanted a family and children. In the end, her parents became her children. Sickly and emotionally needy, they clung to her apron strings as if she had born them into the world. Yet, she loved them and missed their company. They were her family after all, and everything that she had in the world; since their deaths, she had no

one.

While her heart grieved at the loss, she had to admit that she felt different than she thought she would this year. This year there was a sense of happiness, even joy maybe or freedom. “It’s probably because it’s my first Christmas to have my own place and money I made myself,” she thought. Pearl had scrimped and saved throughout the year. Winters were hard even when she lived with her parents. She was glad she didn’t have to buy a bunch of Christmas presents. She did buy a nice red flannel shirt for Maddie. They had been friends since Maddie was a little girl. Lord knew that girl needed a friend when Maddie’s mother was so mean. Other than Maddie, she had no other gifts to buy, and even then, Maddie didn’t expect anything from her. Pearl did not count the poinsettias placed in the church. She gave those in honor of her parents’ memory. A gift to the church even though she still owed for them. Pearl tried to remember when the pastor had said the poinsettias would arrive. She wanted to pay for them and place them on the graves at the same time. She wanted only one trip to the church to take care of two tasks.

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Pearl always thought of the practical. It was a necessity when living

on a farm. You had to be practical and frugal. She continued to worry about making it through the winter in the trailer park, but mostly because she was like her grandma and her deddy who were both worriers. The first year after her parents' deaths she was still in the farmhouse. This would be the first winter in the trailer, and so far, it seemed like the trailer was warmer than the old drafty farmhouse. Seemed like it didn't take so much money to run the place either, but Pearl played it safe and saved what she could. You never knew what might happen.

Since she only had to care for herself and the small trailer, sometimes she felt a little rich with the extra money from waiting on tables. She knew she wasn't rich in a worldly sense though. Pearl had everything she needed and therefore she had everything she wanted. Never one to wish for things, she began to think of different ways she could make her money stretch farther. So far, the only thing she could think of was to fold it up into her old rubber boots. Maybe that was all there was to it, though some folks would tell her to put it in the bank. She had been stuffing money into that old boot for six months now. Pearl wondered if she should count it.



## **Nine**

*Nine is a number symbolic of intense life-death struggle. Learned that once from a college literature class. The number nine represents those struggles in our lives*

*where we do not want to let go because we are afraid of dying. Yet, at the same time,*

*we want to choose life. The funny thing about humans is that we also hold on to those things that might not be best for us. Holding on to our pain or loneliness is sometimes easier than grasping life and wholeness. Why? Because, when we've lived*

*long lives of pain and loneliness, that's what we know.*

*We are familiar with the pain and we are somehow friends with loneliness. We have lived in difficulty for so long that we know its ebb and flow and what to expect*

*from its movements. To let go of our pain and loneliness means that we must trust*

*in the unknown – life and happiness. Even scarier is the fact that love is always intertwined with life and happiness.*

*What's scary about love you may say? There is one thing that you can depend on with love – it changes you. You become somehow different. You give of yourself*

*to another and make yourself vulnerable to another person. You risk the life you have always known to step out on a limb and share your innermost being. You hang your heart out on a limb and often suspend judgment. Now that is a life-*

*death*

*struggle.*

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## 10 CHURCH

*“There were twelve disciples, Jesus called to help him. Simon Peter, Andrew, James, his brother John. Phillip, Thomas, Matthew, James the son of Alpheus, Thaddeus, Simon, Judas, and Bartholomew. He has called us too. He has called us too. We are his disciples and his work we’ll do.” ~Children’s Hymn*

It had been a long time since Maddie had heard a children’s choir. Their angelic voices and mischievous expressions brought back memories of when she too was innocent and trusting. Standing beside her mother, childhood did not seem like that long ago. Maddie always came to Homecoming Sunday with her mother once a year and it was the only time she visited the Baptist church. The country church was picturesque in its country setting. The church was founded near Thanksgiving, so the people always celebrated homecoming at that date.

The white-framed church was nestled in the rolling hills of Stanly County and still had its original church bell that regularly

pealed paeans of praise through the countryside. Inside the church, the simple white walls and old-timey stained glass windows offered a prayerful welcome. When lit with the morning sun, colored images from the glass danced on the creaky wooden floors. At times, Maddie could swear spirits danced on the floor, even in that church where humans were forbidden to dance. In the summer, the smell of the freshly oiled wood once sent her dreaming of the house that she would one day build. Her dream was not so lofty as King David's, and not a dream of an elaborate temple for God or worship, just a place where everyone felt accepted. She wanted to build a place where even guests would feel at home. That is why she had worked so hard on her new house.

Her mind wandered from the church service to her new house. Sitting on ten acres of wooded land, the house rested in

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a clearing. Her front door faced south and the rear faced north.

The front living area was large and open with a cathedral ceiling highlighted by exposed beams. Looking into the kitchen, there was evidence of an accomplished cook. Fresh herbs hung to

dry in a dim corner and copper pots hung in a circle over the large, freestanding counter. Ascending the stairs to the loft area, an open airy space led to Maddie's pottery studio. To the right of her studio she had placed her bedroom that faced east to catch the morning sun. Full of windows, the main bedroom felt more like a tree house or at least, a place to live in the forest. Across from the foot of her antique wooden bed was a wall of French doors opening onto a small balcony looking into the forest of oak, sassafras, hickory, poplar, and a few pine trees. Above the bed was a clear skylight that allowed the stars to shine through the ceiling. Lying in that bed, the stars felt like angels' eyes watching over Maddie and when the moon moved in certain seasons, she could watch it light a path across the window. Her mind started singing Cat Stevens' song "I'm being followed by a moon shadow."

As Maddie thought of her house, she thought of its holiness. Her brief training in seminary only deepened the interest in philosophy, theology, and religion. Her thoughts soared. Like the rafters of the church, the rafters and beams of her house lifted her spirit. Most people who entered her house gasped at the initial view. Now that she thought of it, the

freestanding counter in the kitchen was like an altar where the meal was prepared to feed the hungry. She designed the counter so that friends could gather around for conversation while she cooked or prepared a salad. Madsen loved to cook and could not wait to serve her first guests at her House Blessing. The large oak dining table in her dining room, was already set and ready. All that needed to happen was for friends to arrive. Well, and for her to arrive too.

It was inconvenient that Maddie had to keep a promise to her mother the same day as the House Blessing. There was no way to get out of going without hell to pay. She had planned the House Blessing with her pastor months before her mom reminded her of the homecoming at her mother's church. As usual, her mother only reminded her a few days before the

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service. Maddie joined her mom at homecoming every year, but every year she hoped her mom would let it go or forget to call her. It was Maddie's way of making peace since not only had Maddie become a Lutheran, but she also "became a lesbian" in her mother's eyes. "One of them thangs," her

mother would say. Maddie kept trying with her mother. At this point in their lives, they were at least learning to live with their differences. That was more than most could hope for.

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## 11 BEAU MEETS THE ST. BERNARD

“Dag nab it!” Beaugard could not believe his bad luck. He had gone to breakfast at the Waffle House before the church people got out on Sunday morning. When he finished eating, he came around the corner near the Wal-Mart, that same corner of the street, and was again face to face with that same Saint Bernard. Again, Beau stopped. And yes, once again, Beau’s red Gran Torino was charged. Then, the dog ran down the road a bit and turned to see what would happen. Beau hurried to the front of his car with the flaps of his black winter hat flying like a World War II ace flyer. The chinstrap dangled in such a way that Beau looked like a character in a slapstick comedy. He turned his head this way and then that way, trying to catch sight of the dog that had busted his new radiator grill. His strap and ear flaps flopped against his head as he searched for the devil himself. He was going to find that culprit today if he had to knock on the door of every house in that neighborhood. He was not going to be the laughing stock of

his insurance company again. Beau caught a glimpse of white and brown and trotted off in that direction. He had been driving with his boots untied and had forgotten about the laces and the shoe tongues hanging loose out of the tops of the boots. From his head to his toe, Beau was a sight of leather and string flapping in comic relief. He rounded the corner of the house where he thought the dog had run and was quickly spinning on an unexpected ice patch. The momentum of his running made him realize that he was not going to save the fall. The best that he could hope for was that he would land on the soft, brown dirt to the left of the sidewalk. As he fell, he tried to lurch his body towards that soft pile of earth straining every muscle in his body in order to miss falling on the concrete. No sooner had he landed on the compost pile than he felt the grainy rain of coffee grounds pelting his head.

“Dern it!” he yelled.

A scream from the porch sent the huge Saint Bernard charging in his direction.

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## 12 THE HOUSE BLESSING

Other than the preacher trying to save her, Maddie’s visit with her

mom went smoother than normal. While her mom was talking with the preacher's wife, Maddie had hugged her goodbye and trotted away saying "Gotta go. See ya mom." Maddie arrived at her house to find Jonnie and PJ still asleep in the guest room. They were not normally morning risers, so arriving at her house early meant they had been up early for them. She left them resting. She checked on the vegetables Jonnie had put together in the crockpot. Found a place on the cake to taste the icing, knowing she would probably get in trouble. Maddie remembered then that she had wanted one of Pearl's amazing apple pies. She wanted something of Pearl's at the meal in addition to Jonnie's cake. Maddie had one frozen in her freezer, but nothing was as good as Pearl's fresh apple pie straight from the oven. Pearl would have made her a fresh one too if she had remembered to ask.

Pearl had been kind to her as a kid when Maddie's parents were fighting. Maddie had wanted to be related to Pearl mostly because Pearl had a horse, but also because she was kind to her. Yes, one of those fresh pies would have made the dinner for the House Blessing complete and perfect. Instead, a frozen pie would have to do. She could only hope that her guests would not be able to taste that the pie had been frozen. She pulled the pie out of the freezer, took off the Saran wrap, and removed the foil. Just as she was about to put the pie



into the microwave to defrost, Jonnie walked in. “What are you doing? You don’t want to put that in the microwave. I thought you could cook. Here. Give it to me.” Jonnie took the foil and placed it around the edges of the pie crust. “You are too excited I think. Get out of this kitchen and leave this to me.” Jonnie laughed as she said “Go do something useful.”

Maddie felt indebted to PJ and Jonnie because she knew they would take care of the things she would miss or forget. She stoked the logs until there was a roaring fire. As she hung the poker on its spindle, she looked at the beauty displayed on her table. “Jonnie, I don’t know how you work these wonders! You’re the best!” The Christmas tree glowed as if lit by candles. The scent of cinnamon and herbs floated in the air.

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Maddie had decorated the rustic house with the beauty and scents of nature. Poinsettias were placed around the stone fireplace with pinecones and fir placed on its oak mantle. Boughs of fir had been tied together to make garlands for the hand railing up the stairs. Jonnie and PJ had volunteered to take care of the food and drink. The House Blessing would indeed be a celebration. Yet, at the same time, Maddie felt a certain melancholy. Intuitively, she knew that Leah would not

come.

The guests were to arrive at three o'clock. Right before the first car pulled into Maddie's driveway, the phone rang.

"Madsen?"

"Yes."

"This is your mother."

"I know mom. You're the only one who insists on calling me Madsen."

"What's this thing happening at your house? I ran into Pearl and she talked about being invited to your new house and do tell. I cannot believe you did not invite your own mother."

"Mom, I just didn't think you would want to come."

"Well if Pearl can come, I surely don't know why I couldn't. What? Are you ashamed of me?"

"Oh God," Maddie prayed. She hesitated because she was concerned at how her mother would behave around Lutherans and lesbians. Her mom was not known for being tactful and could be a bit evangelical in a Pentecostal way. The hesitation was enough to infuriate her mother.

"Well I never!" yelled her mom and she hung up on Maddie just as the doorbell rang.

"I swear. Now I'll have to deal with the silent treatment for

Christmas. I can't win for losing with her."

When Maddie opened the door, she embraced her dear pastor, invited her in and then excused herself, saying "Excuse me just a minute while I call my mother. Have a seat by the fire. There are also drinks in the kitchen if you're thirsty." Maddie went to the kitchen phone and called her mother. She allowed the phone to ring five times. Hung up, dialed again. Waited five more rings. Hung up and dialed again and this time, as usual, her mother picked up the phone

"What do YOU want?"

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"Mom, my house will be full of people from my church and my lesbian friends. Please come over if you wish."

"Are the church people trying to convert you?"

"What?"

"Are those people finally getting some sense into your head about your and your friends' sinfulness?"

"No ma. They are all my friends. The pastor and everyone at my church love my friends and me just as we are. So, if you are willing to come and be peaceable, you are welcome to come over here."

"I don't want to be around them thangs."

“See mother, it is that type of comment that keeps me from inviting you. I love you, but I don’t want you to talk to me that way and I definitely won’t have you talking to my friends that way.”

“Fine by me.” And her mother hung up again.

Maddie shook her head as she hung up the phone. The pastor had walked into the kitchen and looked a little stunned at first and then said “Wanted to see if I could help in here. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, had hoped to avoid talking to my mom about the House Blessing. She has a way of taking the joy out of things sometimes.”

"Same old story," said Jonnie as she and PJ arranged the food platters.

Maddie introduced the pastor and her friends and the doorbell rang again. Before Maddie could cross the floor, Paula and Lorna drove up to the house. Behind them, other cars began to pull in and soon Maddie’s house was full of people. Love and acceptance walked in the door to stay for the party. It was going to be a beautiful day after all.

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The house was blessed by the pastor with each friend adding his or her own version of blessing to Maddie’s new abode. The ritual was beautiful and the house seemed to glow with blessing as the people later gathered their coats and sweaters to leave. There was laughter and

chatter all the way down the sidewalk as Maddie watched her friends pack into their cars and leave. A light rain began to fall after the last car drove away. While her heart was happy from the friends and the blessing, she could not help but feel a certain disappointment. Leah

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had not come. Not one word from her. There was no phone call either saying "Thanks but no thanks. I'm busy." They had not talked that much, but Maddie had felt a connection with Leah.

Maddie had to admit that it bothered her that she even cared about Leah's absence. It wasn't as if they were close, or even friends really. There was something in Leah's ways that stirred up the emotions that felt like the steps to love or at least love's hopefulness. Maddie had promised herself that she would keep herself distant from ever feeling love again. She did not want to be hurt like before. At the same time, her heart yearned to love again as a sailor yearns for the sea. However, who wants to go through the pain of love and the storms of a relationship? It seemed like all that Maddie could remember of love was the pain and the hurt. Maddie's first response was to find a way to punish herself for feeling. Feelings always cause trouble she thought. Maddie turned to clean the dishes. As she washed her dishes, she

hummed an old tune to new words “I’m gonna wash that woman right outta my hair...”

§

The rain had been pittering on the window for at least an hour as Leah listened to her mother ramble over the phone. She was cozy in her second-floor apartment. The apartment looked over the five-point crossing of roads and from her window she could see downtown Charlotte. The outside of the apartment building was not the typical architecture for Charlotte or other southern towns, but appeared like Boston brownstone apartment buildings. Leah’s mother continued to chatter as Leah looked out at the clouds. Cold and wet, the winter afternoon had been perfect for reading a book. Her mother’s phone call interrupting the flow. Her mother said that the meteorologist called for freezing rain turning into snow, but Leah doubted the snow. Even if it was mid-December, it rarely snowed in Charlotte. Her mother rambled on about how she had been blessed to be able to retire early and Leah wondered when she would take a breath.

As her mother repeated the word “blessed,” it seemed to ring a bell in Leah’s memory. She was not quite sure why. Perhaps she needed to reflect on her own blessings during her devotion time. Leah’s mother finally decided she had talked enough and besides, dad needed supper.

As Leah hung up the phone, her eyes fell on a Home Depot

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advertisement from the Sunday edition of The Charlotte Observer.

“Oh, my gosh! Maddie’s House Blessing. It was today and I’ve missed it!” She raced around the small apartment pulling pieces of paper out of pockets, drawers and finally her briefcase in a vain attempt to find Maddie’s number. She found the directions to Maddie’s house, but no phone number.

She could not remember Maddie’s last name or the town where she lived. What a time for her mind to go blank. She racked her brain trying to remember if Maddie even wrote the number down or if Maddie’s last name was ever mentioned. Then again, why did it matter? She was not interested in this woman anyway and she definitely did not want to appear desperate. Yet, she hated that she was missing her first House Blessing. Besides, there was no need to be rude.

“How can I get that darn phone number?” she said to Ms. Cookies.

The cat looked up as only a cat can and smugly meowed “How should I know?”

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## 13 FIRST SNOW

A week later, the snow began falling, downy soft and light. Maddie smiled at the image and imagined the angels in heaven molting. Maddie had always enjoyed snow, but in the Piedmont of North Carolina it came very seldom and rarely in the first of December. This surprise storm was close enough to Christmas to have everybody wishing and praying for a white Christmas. The telephone interrupted her warm reverie.

“Maddie, this is Beau.”

“Howdy. What’s up?”

“You know how I keep m’ cows at m’ dads?”

“Yeah?”

“Well, they’re down in the lower pasture and we need some help movin’ ‘em up to the barn. You’re the closest one around ‘at has a four-wheel drive. Can you help us out?”

“Sure, just let me get my boots on and I’ll be up there.” Maddie usually liked going out in the snow, but today was different. She wanted to stay in the house and relax. The fact that Beau had a way of turning one favor into five did not motivate her either. She could always say no to the extra tasks, but most of the time she would have already completed them before she realized what had happened. This was



what kept her from visiting his barbershop more often. He always asked her to do him a favor. It had been that way ever since Beau's wife left him. He was always trying to get some woman, any woman to do the dishes, feed the cats or something.

Maddie missed visiting the shop as she did before Beau's wife left him. Maddie liked talking with the men in the old barbershop that Beau heated with a wood stove. The smell of the hair tonic and the sound of the clippers switch-switching created a peaceful experience. She usually heard some good fishing tips too. When there were enough people in the shop, you could count on Beau having a good story to tell and if he didn't have one, he could sure make them up. Beau was quite the character. He didn't mean to take advantage of her, she was sure of that. Maybe she would say something to him. Today she would start by being firm. She would help him with the cows and that was it.

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The drive to Beau's home place was short, but tricky because of the slick, hilly roads. The countryside was beautiful and pristine as the snow laced its way to the ground. Those places that seemed shabby and dirty appeared to be purified by the clean, white snow. Soon she could see Beau's red Torino waiting up at the top of the hill. How that

monster made it in the snow, she was not sure. One could never tell where Beau might drive it. She was sure he had gotten his money's worth out of that old car. Arriving, she was greeted by Beau hurrying in the distance to get a new sack of feed out of his car and into the barn. He waved for her to join him inside.

"Thanks fer comin' over," he shouted as he disappeared into the mouth of the old barn. Looking at the rusted tin siding, it did not seem feasible that the tin barn should be warm, but the structure and the hay created a warm haven for farm animals and playful, adventurous children. Barns were wonderful places full of the scent of memories. Maddie entered the barn and breathed in the smell of the fresh hay and sweet feed like the kind she fed her own horse. Molasses mixed into the grain smelled sweet enough to be a human treat.

"Thought some sweet feed would get' em up here faster."  
commented Beau "This here's m' dad."

"Hello Mr. Ivey. I'm Maddie. We met once at the sawmill." As Maddie greeted the older farmer, he slowly nodded his head in hello, but remained silent. She was struck with the fun of Beau's last name and began to smile. She was first introduced to Beau on a first name basis. It was two years later, that she had heard Beau's last name and yet, it still made her chuckle, Beau Ivey. Being in the snow made her

think of the old folk singer, Burl Ives, even more as she waited for Beau's instructions. Beau looked nothing like the singer except for the wire rim glasses except Beau's had square frames. Beau hurried by Maddie again "Maddie, follow me down here to th' road b'tween the pastures. What we'll do is I'll go find th' cows and shoo 'em up to you. Then if you'll keep 'em movin', dad'll get 'em into th' barn."

They both hustled down the path to the road. After Beau pulled back the barbed wire gates to make a channel fence, Maddie took her place between the two pastures. She looked up the hill as the old farmer in worn and stained overalls started calling out "Sook! Sook!" She could tell that he preferred to search for the cows himself, but Beau argued that at ninety-three years, it was best for him to wait at the barn.

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He called out a few more times and then fell into his natural silent posture of attention with his hands in the pockets of his overalls.

Maddie stood waiting and became aware of the pure stillness around her. Because snow virtually stopped all traffic in the area, there were no motor sounds. No airplanes flew by. No cars on the road. There was only the sound of snow falling on snow. Tch, tch, tch. Silence.

White, clean silence. Ultimate solitude. Soft, peaceful stillness. She held

her breath for a moment in awe. What an experience to have while anticipating Christmas Eve and the coming Prince of Peace. She stood waiting there, mesmerized by the cold, white landscape loving the peace.

Thud, thud, thud, thud. The cows sounded loud as they tromped by Maddie. She could hear their heavy footsteps and the sound of their labored breathing and snorting. The experience continued to remind her of the Christmas story as the cows moved toward their own mangers. As she shooed the cows on, a tune came to her head, then the words. The song was one of her favorite carols written by Christina Rossetti. She began to sing in her mind as the cows passed by:

*“In the bleak mid-winter, long ago. Earth  
stood cold as iron, water like a stone. Snow was  
falling snow on snow, snow on snow. In the bleak  
mid-winter, long ago. What shall I give him, poor  
as I am? If I were a shepherd, I would give a lamb.  
If I were a wise man, I would do my part. But what  
I can I give him, Give him my heart.*

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15 HOLIDAY SHOPPING

“Hark how the bells, sweet silver bells all seem to say throw cares away...” faded into a new tune as Leah entered another store “...ten lords a leaping, nine maids a milking...” and Leah hurried back into the mall’s corridor. Leah loved the first song but hated the latter one. She wanted to wait until she knew the annoying tune was over and go back into the store, but there was no time for that. She would have to endure the torturous song while she made her last frantic purchase for Christmas. She could not believe she had forgotten to get her mother a little something extra. In her heart, she thought it would be okay. There was still however, a child’s heart hidden inside of her adult understanding, a heart that worried that her mother counted presents. Did Leah give her mother as much as she did her dad or her brother? She loved her family and dreaded them at the same time. Her brother was out of the country on some archaeological dig so he would not be hounding her with pranks this year. That made things a little easier, although she dreaded the extra attention it would bring to her. She missed her sister and hoped that she would be there, but her mother had run her off because of her sister’s “hoodlum” boyfriend. She doubted they had made up yet. At least this year she did not have to worry about leaving a lover behind while she went to see her parents. Leah thought there might be blessings in being single at Christmas

time. It was certainly better on the pocketbook. She usually went over budget when buying gifts for a lover. She had always been generous to family and friends. Perhaps it was better to be alone this year. Money seemed a little tighter. At the same time, she missed having a special person with whom to share the holidays. It had been almost three years since Toni had left and she missed her still. Sometimes Leah wondered if there would ever be another love for her. A good companion was hard to find. Toni had seemed perfect. She loved God, nature and for a couple of years, she had loved Leah. The break up was a bad blow to Leah, though for Toni, it seemed to mean nothing.

Leah walked by the jewelry counter and rushed past the rings to look for another gift for her mother. Leah and Toni had exchanged rings and prayed that their relationship would be holy. Their union felt sacred for the longest time. Forever did not seem like an impossible

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dream with Toni. Then, in a puff of whimsy, it was gone. Everything vanished as though Houdini had put on his best show and made a lesbian disappear. The difference was that the only illusion that had faced Leah was the illusion that if she waited long enough, Toni would come back to her. Finally, during the past summer, Leah decided to let

go of that hope. Toni was not coming back to her, and if she did, how could Leah trust her after all the betrayal? She somehow felt she was in the midst of the solemn celebration of Lent rather than the festivity of Christmas preparations. She wasn't feeling Advent or the anticipation of anyone but God's coming to earth. Leah gave up a lot when Toni left, even having to sell their nice house by herself and move into the tiny apartment. Leah looked at the gaudy, imitation jewelry in the case and threw up her hands in surrender. "Might as well let go of one more thing," she said as she walked towards the exit "I quit worrying about trying to please my mother."

§

Christmas Eve approached faster than Pearl wanted. She faced a new dilemma. She did not want to go to church. She had gone to church with her mom and dad for fifty years of her life and it was time to stop. Anyway, she had gone out of obligation to her parents and a religious fear of hell. Now that she thought about it, her fear of hell and her fear of her parents were the only reasons she had gone to church. This year, she was going to do something different. She was not going to church. She was going to do something better, though she was not sure what that would be. Anything had to be better than sitting around a church while tired people fell asleep by candlelight.

They only woke up when the singing started. She had to admit that she liked the children's program at the early service, mostly because they made her laugh. Pearl was not going to go to church at all. She hated going out so many times in the cold. It made her tired. Now there was a thought. She could go to bed early for once. She had never liked late nights. She might even slip in to an ABC store and buy some kind of liquor for her coffee. She had seen on television that they do that in the city. She hadn't the faintest idea what to buy though, but she could ask Maddie. She thought that Maddie sometimes imbibed. The more she thought about her deviance, the more she became excited. After fifty years of routine, she was going

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to celebrate Christmas by doing something different. She could not help but feel the anticipation.

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16 CHRISTMAS EVE

Leah was glad that her church was having a noon service. Christmas Eve was not the same without attending some type of church service. Her family would not go with her to church on holidays saying that the



holidays were time to spend with the family. Leah found it easier to find ways to worship alone than to continue to endure the grief her parents gave her for worshipping on holy days. St. Peter's Episcopal really knew how to celebrate holy days too. Episcopal churches were the best at architectural choices as well. While listening to the soft carols, she breathed a restful sigh as she focused on one of the stained-glass windows. Each window portrayed an angel dressed in rich colors of purple and red.

The angel's name was not listed and had an androgynous appearance. The face of the angel looked down upon her as if in blessing. Glowing in the mid-day light, the glass illumined the eyes of the angel so that they looked afire. In that moment, Leah could see how angels brought forth fear in the hearts of simple shepherds.

Looking at the glowing, stained glass eyes of the angel, she remembered a science fiction movie she had seen once. The aliens had come to earth and when angered, their eyes would glow fiercely red. Radiant angels, filled with the fire of God's light shining in their eyes and clothed in the glory of God's love, would have been startling to say the least.

The light in the glass angel's face changed as the sun moved, causing the intensity of its eyes to lessen. From being a sight of fearsome light,

the angel's face changed into a compassionate warm face. The warmth radiated a message of God's grace and seemed as if the angel was listening to Leah's thoughts. Leah's heart lifted to God in prayer. How could she listen to the poor? She had some money though she was not rich, she could not consider herself poor. She always had her necessities, but not a lot of extra. Watching the face of the angel, Leah thought about the poverty of Jesus' family, and began to think more of those in need. How many had no food, much less a scrumptious

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Christmas feast? How many women and children would experience abuse rather than warm embraces? How many wished for the warmth of a coat or enough heat to make it through the winter rather than wish for enough wood to make a romantic fire in the fireplace?

Leah had felt sorry for herself because she was single again at Christmas. Yet, she had a family who loved her as well as church friends who opened their hearts and homes to her. She was humbled by the feeling that she was a rich person peeking in on a bewildering site, or insight. In her mind's eye, she saw the gospel's representation of Jesus in a manger. The child of God was not born to wealth and power, but born amid poverty and struggle. God came to her too on

this holy day. In the poverty of her heart, in the poverty of her mind, God came to her. The sun in the window moved lower still and touched a part of the angel's clothing. She followed where the color of light landed. There, on the altar of the church, the red of the angel's robe colored the bread of communion with a light pink, the color of blushing flesh. Then the voice of the preacher spoke out "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen God's glory, the glory of the Creator's only son, full of grace and truth." Leah looked back to the face of the angel, amazed at how light could change the way an object appeared. Leah's thoughts turned to the reading of the scripture as the angel smiled.

§

Pearl felt like a criminal. She watched from her blinds as her neighbors loaded up their cars for the evening service at the Baptist church. Sparkling Christmas lights on the neighbors' trees seemed to wink at Pearl's mischief, knowing accomplices on a religious prank. She felt like she was getting away with something delicious. As she giggled, the telephone rang. Darn telephone. She hated those things. They always ring when least desired. She thought of something she should have bought with her extra money, an answering machine; that way she could listen to see if the call was important. Of course, it had

to be important, Pearl never got social telephone calls, even the town gossip knew better than to try to bend Pearl's ear. Since the telephone had already rung four times, she raced to get it.

"Pearl, are you okay?" asked Joe.

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"Yes, I was...busy."

"I heard you say to one of the customers yesterday that you weren't doing anything for Christmas. Thought I'd ask if you'd like to come with me to the city tomorrow. A couple of us go to Charlotte Rescue Mission's kitchen downtown to feed the people that come on Christmas Day. The only requirement is that you keep this to yourself. Those of us that go have a reputation as being stingy and uncaring. We especially don't want those church people from around here saying that we need to be in church because we feed some homeless people. Now, if you can't keep it to yourself, I'd just as soon you forget I made this call. Whatta ya say?"

Thrilled by thoughts of a new adventure that was also anti-church, Pearl readily agreed to the terms of Joe's pact. In fact, it seemed to intensify her rebellious spirit. She might not go to church ever again and tempt the fires of hell. That way, at least there would be one less

hypocrite there. She was filled with a sense of glee never experienced before. Something good was about to happen she was sure.

§

The singing of the carols always brought joy to Maddie's heart. She had been singing all day. Sometimes when she was down, she would sing Christmas carols even when it was not Christmas. Maddie looked around the church to see who had come to the service. The sanctuary was full of Christmas cheer. Maddie wondered if Pearl went through with her plan to skip church. She smiled to herself as she remembered Pearl's excitement and acting like a young girl with Maddie playing the role of the loving, watchful parent. Maddie wished she had done something new for Christmas this year. Christmas had always been her favorite holiday because it felt as if love came forth from even the coldest person. She reflected as she listened to the choir's anthem "Love Came Down at Christmastime." Maddie thought about how she had always felt God's love. From an early age, she had been blessed to know of God loving her; she did not know how she knew this, only that God's love was a truth.

Most gays and lesbians are told so often that they are unloved by God that it is almost impossible for them to believe in God's love. Heck, if the humans can't be loving and kind, how could they believe

in a loving God? Maddie certainly didn't learn of this love from her

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parents and was sure the only place she could have learned it was from her grandmother. Her grandmother had been a farmer's wife and the mother of twelve. The farming life was a hard life but her grandmother never complained and continually used her Native American heritage to care for the land in ways that even her grandfather did not know. Often her grandmother's heritage called forth ridicule from Maddie's grandfather. Nevertheless, they seemed to love one another...or at least stayed together for over seventy-five years. They married when her grandmother was thirteen and her grandfather was only seventeen, babies really. Too young to be called husband and wife in modern society. To think that Mary was that young. It was a different world then.

§

Christmas Eve had come quickly. However, as Pearl lay awake, waiting for Christmas Day, it seemed like time had stopped. She felt like a child again and was reminded of her past, waiting for Santa Claus to bring something magical in his reindeer-drawn sled. She laughed at her feelings because it had been many years since she believed in

anything, much less Santa Claus. After she looked at the clock and saw that only one minute had passed, she thought that perhaps some chamomile tea would help her relax and sleep. She rose to put on the kettle and noticed how brightly the moon shone. The milky white light beamed through the windows illuminating each room. Finding her way in the moonlit trailer was easy. It added to the anticipatory mood that she harbored. She became a child sneaking to peek at the mysterious man who came on Christmas Eve. As she looked at the clock yet again, she said aloud “He won’t be coming for a while yet.” Ten o’clock was early for the gracious giver to appear.

She watched the burner coil on the stove turn to a bright, red-orange then remembered the Kahlua liquor she had bought for her coffee. This was to be the night she tasted her liquor, or “li-quoor” as Maddie had called it. She would wait to add it to her coffee in the morning; for now, she did not want to break the mystical mood of the moment. She had never drunk liquor before and was not sure what would happen anyway, did not know if she would like it. Her mother

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always called liquor “spirits” and often talked about how the “spirits” changed people. She wondered if the spirits would change her too.

What a word “spirit.” In church, the word is so important it is capitalized “Spirit.” The Spirit is supposedly the part of God that lives in a person, the part of the living Christ to be born into each believer. She wondered why the Spirit never seemed to be born in her, especially after all that church. Oh, the Baptists talk about it all the time and tell you what you are supposed to say and feel, but Pearl had never felt any of that. She could not have told a soul about that though or her parents would have disowned her.

What did it mean to have a spirit born in your heart? She wondered if the wise men who went to see Jesus knew what it meant that the king they sought would be found in a stable. The tea kettle began to whistle. As she poured steaming water over the tea bag, she found herself gazing out at the stars, imagining Magi looking to heavens and following a single star to something unknown to them. They must have believed in something beyond themselves to do such a foolish thing.

What must people have thought when they left on a long journey into the unknown places? Pearl wondered if they were ridiculed for taking time away from everyday life to pursue something new. Was it as exciting as her new adventure? She wondered what she would find tomorrow at the soup kitchen.



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## 17 CHRISTMAS DAY

On Christmas morning, Maddie lay in her bed and watched the dust particles dance in the early morning sunlight. Pearl was in her trailer, busy rushing around gathering up miscellaneous items she thought she would need in order to prepare Christmas dinner at the soup kitchen.

Or she at least wanted those things handy in case the soup kitchen didn't have what she needed. Leah had slept at her parents. It was what they expected. She shuffled into her mother's kitchen wondering what it would be like to have children in the house at Christmas. If children got up any earlier than her mother did, Leah would not be able to take it.

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As far as Beau was concerned, he was at his own house and he was a basket case. That morning chasing the St. Bernard had turned into an experience that Beau had not expected. Not only did he get coffee grounds dumped on his head and bruises (from the fall and then from the dog jumping on him), he got a date for Christmas Day. The scream he had heard came from a small woman with her salt and pepper hair cut in the Dutch-boy style. Upon realizing that Beau was harmless, the woman, rushed to his rescue; if you could call it a rescue. Her name

was Anna, and she was small, but she in shape. However, she wasn't nearly as big as the dog. More or less, her calm manner persuaded the dog to leave Beau alone, oh and perhaps the gargantuan chew toy she retrieved from the kitchen. Somewhere between her apologies for the damage to Beau's clothes and then, talk about paying for the busted car grills, Beau had invited the woman to come to his house for Christmas lunch. She first asked about Beau's family. After Beau explained how his family always celebrated on Christmas Eve, she offered that it would be perfect since her daughter lived in France. He was shocked when she said that she would be honored to join him. He wondered if she had really thought about what she was doing. Beau had been a handsome man in his youth and he certainly wasn't bad for a man his age, though he did have a little bit of a belly. They both

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decided to prepare a favorite dish and for dessert, Anna would try some persimmon pudding made by Beau's mama.

One thing concerned him though, she said she was a yogi. Beau wasn't quite sure what she meant by that, but didn't want to appear dumb so he just said, "That's nice." Beau didn't get out much and didn't read much other than his 1969 World Encyclopedias. He

guessed he could go by the shop and check out that meaning before he met Anna or he could call Maddie and ask her what she thought a yogi was. He was sure Maddie would know. The only yogi Beau could remember was Yogi Bear and he was pretty sure that Anna didn't have that same voice as the cartoon. Maybe she worked at a children's party store and dressed as Yogi for children's parties...but Beau was concerned that wasn't quite right. Yogi Bear was something on television when his girls were young and they were all grown up now, things have changed even if Beau and his encyclopedias had not changed much. Yep, Beau was sure that Maddie was the one who would know and wondered what time Maddie got up of a morning.

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Joe had picked Pearl up on time. He sipped on his coffee while driving, but mostly they were quiet. Pearl waited for something to happen as she rode to the soup kitchen. Silly as it seems, she felt that at any minute, Santa and his sled would appear or some shepherds would start walking across the road. She was that excited about doing something different on Christmas day. Nothing extraordinary seemed to be occurring however, and Pearl wondered what had gotten into her crazy mind this Christmas. If she had not looked at her calendar this morning, this day would appear like any other day. Having skipped

church may have been a bad idea and she forgot to tell Maddie to pick up her poinsettias. Other than the fact that she was going to a new place, there was nothing that made this day special. There was not a lot of traffic, but maybe that was what it was always like in that part of Mecklenburg County. Joe's car radio did not work, so there was not even any Christmas music to remind them that the day was anything other than ordinary.

As they rode through the countryside, Pearl saw patches of white where the snow had fallen the previous week. Shady spots continued to be cold enough to keep the precious white patches intact. Her mama

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had always said if snow was on the ground for more than a week it was waiting around for more snow. The sky was bright yellow from the beautiful sunny day, but the wind blew brisk and cold. If any precipitation happened, it would turn to sleet or snow. The sun seemed bright, but on this day, the light was not a source of heat. Joe's heater worked, but the weather was cold enough that sitting by the window Pearl could feel the cold against her right arm and legs. They were going to feed the homeless. What would a cold day feel like to a homeless person? Being homeless, the men had no place to lay their

heads or get out of the cold or rain, no place to get warm or feel safe.

Pearl remembered how afraid she was when she learned that she would have to sell her parents' old house, but she never really thought she would be homeless and she wasn't. Pearl then thought of Mary being in a strange town with no place safe to have a baby and wondered if Mary was ever afraid.

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As Leah returned to the guestroom at her parents' house, her sadness hung on her like a hauberk. Christmas Day should be a day of joy, but her heart was heavy with grief. Although her partners never could join her at her family's home, the holidays were better knowing that she would go home to someone after a day with her parents. She was tired of living alone. Maybe she should move somewhere different, but she didn't really want to move and wondered why that thought had even popped into her mind. Though, a place closer to the college would help. She liked the anonymity of the city, but she had two or more hours on the road each day. Perhaps she could find a little place in the country as cozy as her apartment. On her daily drive to the school, she passed through several quaint towns on highway forty-nine. She bet one of those towns would be the perfect place to move and when she had stopped for gas or a bite to eat, the people always

seemed friendly. She would be glad to give up the hour's drive. Maybe she would go exploring in the next day or so. She felt the weight of sadness lift a bit at the glint of adventure. Now she had something to which she could look forward. Now she could go and "do Christmas" with her family.

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Pearl stood there in the door of the soup kitchen for a moment and merely stared. She had never been to a soup kitchen for the homeless before and could not believe how many people were standing in the cold waiting for a meal, and it was Christmas Day. As she wondered where the peoples' families were, Joe spoke "Some of these are the people who didn't get a place to sleep last night." He tugged at her arm to get her moving towards the kitchen. There was work to do and many people to feed. The kitchen was an industrial size kitchen and stocked with everything a cook needed. Pearl found herself wishing she had one of those poufy white hats she had seen the French chefs wear on television, then immediately chastised herself for wanting something so frivolous when the people she was about to feed had nothing. As she glanced around, she saw that some of the people looked like

women. A few clung to big bags or a grocery cart.

She remembered that she had put her extra tip money into her purse that morning and it totaled fifty dollars. Looking at those waiting in line with dirty and inadequate clothing with no place to sleep at night, she felt very rich. The feeling shamed her. After Joe introduced her to the others already at work in the kitchen, she found a place where she could join in the meal preparation. The meal in progress would be a fine Christmas dinner with turkey, dressing and all the holiday fixings.

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By the time Anna had arrived at Beau's house, Beau had burned everything he could find and had forgotten to call Maddie. Anna pulled into the driveway to see him fanning a piece of cardboard at the open sliding glass door. She thought if she said anything that could be misconstrued as criticism that he would break down, even though he really didn't seem the type. Anna always functioned well in the middle of chaos, which is why Buddhist thought had attracted her. Yoga and meditation had provided her with more stability, peace and had further centered her in calmness. That calm was just what she needed as she entered Beau's house. It was what he needed too! Not only had he been standing at the door fanning the air with cardboard, he had also

turned on every fan he could find in the house. He was lucky he had

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not burned his house down. The radio was only partially on its station so that the music flickered between “O Holy Night” and “Grandma got run over by a reindeer.” In between the songs there was static. For a moment, they looked awkwardly at one another.

She held out a loaf of bread to Beau “Homemade bread for today’s lunch. I also have some wonderful cheese to go with the dessert I made – apple strudel!” Beau looked embarrassed, then invited her into the house.

“Do you mind if I set the radio on the ‘O Holy Night’ station?” asked Anna.

Beau shook his head and then launched into a string of apologies. As Anna adjusted the station, she listened to Beau’s ramblings and noticed he looked quite handsome in his Sunday best. She could see his suit jacket on the back of a chair. To calm Beau down, Anna offered quietly,

“Would you like me to prepare something for us to eat? I can start after I get the dessert out of the car.”

Beau looked out the window of his den as he timidly replied, “I



think I burned it all.” He stood still for a moment, unable to look at her. “Go ahead,” Beau said dejectedly. All Beau could really hear were the taunts of his ex-wife of how he always used too much Crisco when he cooked. Beau went out and brought in the beautiful dessert Anna had made and placed it quietly on the table.

“Do you mind if I look through your cupboards?” Anna asked quiet and calm. Beau shook his head, no. “Go ahead and sit down. I’m sure I’ll find something.” Anna could see as he sat down that although he was disgusted with the events of the morning, he was also relieved that she was there to prepare a meal. She only hoped that he had more in his pantry than most men kept on hand. If not, this would be a meal of bread, strudel, and persimmon pudding...whatever that was.

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Maddie’s family had always exchanged gifts on Christmas Eve and followed the big event by Christmas caroling. She came from a family of singers and artists. Since none of them were close, they spent few holidays together. Christmas Eve was the exception, but Christmas Day was all hers. Maddie had no commitments and thought she might

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throw a new vase on her potter’s wheel and birth something she could

handle on Christmas Day.

Maddie had happened into pottery quite by chance. She first took a pottery class as part of her art curriculum. When she first saw the instructor, she had a crush. Once she got into the making of pottery, she forgot the instructor existed except when she would advise Maddie on how to improve. The instructor told Maddie she was a natural. She had been a potter ever since.

As she sipped the last of her morning coffee, she looked out to Lightning standing at the fence. He looked happy, or at least as happy as a horse can look. She was glad that he hadn't shaken off his blanket when she let him out of his stall. She thought she might take him out for a ride and then make that vase. Why not enjoy nature and be creative on Christmas Day? Life was made of these experiences. The silence that hung in the house was like a whisper of the holy. Perhaps she would start the pottery piece first. She walked out to put Lightning in his stall. She always got lost in thought as she prepared to start a new piece.

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"Minutes turn into hours," Leah thought as she listened to her father drone on about the instability of the stock market. She looked at her watch and gasped inwardly "no, minutes turn into minutes." It

was as if she was in a time warp and held prisoner by her father's hypotheses of how to survive the market. Leah had never been interested in financial matters and never would be interested in lengthy conversations on something so cold and numerical. The only numbers she liked were those that count the meter and rhythm of music. If he would just take a breath, she could get him to move to the piano. He was an excellent pianist and could have played professionally except he would have nothing to do with career that did not make money. Money had been his goal for as long as she could remember. He was greatly disappointed when she loved music enough to want to teach. He even threatened that should she pursue music as a profession, he would not pay for her college education. That was when her stubborn determination kicked in. She was not going to live the life of her father and miss all of life's glories to make a dollar. He chose not to become a stock broker like his dad, but he often thought like

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one. She watched his face harden through the years as he went in day after day at his architectural firm while also investing so that her mother could have the prestige that she coveted. While he enjoyed the creativity of architecture, he truly came alive when he played the piano.

Leah remembered too clearly the long hours he was away from the family when she was a child. There was never time for him to listen to her play the piano or read to her and her sister. There was only time to work.

From an early age, Leah had vowed to live life fully, and to be as happy as possible. She had done well at living life fully, but unfortunately, it was not always as happy as she had dreamed. She guessed that she had read too many fairy tales with happy endings. However, fairy tales never broached the subject of being gay or lesbian. No sooner had she thought that than her father abruptly stood up and tromped towards the library door.

“Where are you going?” asked Leah.

“I can see I’ve pushed you past your threshold of discussing financial matters,” he said in a gruff manner “perhaps it’s time to play the piano.”

He smiled kindly then, but Leah grimaced as she thought about her inconsiderate response to her dad’s ramblings. Still, as she looked at him, she could see he was already relaxing. She knew by his demeanor that she was forgiven. Leah’s father positioned himself at the piano as if he were a concert pianist preparing for a solo with the symphony.

Leah watched her father’s hands as they played a rendition of “O Little

Town of Bethlehem.” As graceful as a ballet dancer, his fingers pirouetted over the keyboard. He smiled impishly as he modulated into another key and began a bluesy improvisation of “Heartbreak Hotel.” Her father loved to make medleys of songs and tunes that vacillated between serious and comical and he had a special love of puns in any form. This playfulness was the aspect of her father that she loved best. He seemed to be in rare form today. As he smiled and looked at her, she realized that this was her father’s special Christmas gift to her. He knew how his playing soothed her soul and it was a gift she wished she could give him in response.

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“Where are they all going to sit?” asked Pearl. She was concerned that there would not be enough seats or food for all who waited outside. Everyone was too busy to answer. She moved to her assigned place on the serving line shortly before they opened the doors to the dining hall, watching with disbelief. Nothing had ever touched her so strongly. She did not even remember a feeling like this at the death of her parents. A grief came from deep down inside of her, a sense of helplessness, but also a sense of recognition of herself somehow in

these homeless people, these wanderers. There was nothing she could do to change the plight of the people coming for this meal. Her fifty dollars seemed meager in comparison to their great need. All she could do was smile and serve them something to eat. As she began filling the sectioned plates, she found herself praying.

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The potter's wheel spun in peaceful motion as Maddie added water to the lump of clay in the wheel's center. Christmas carols played on the radio with strains of Handel's "For Unto Us A Child is Born" weaving melody into her pottery. Maddie began to ponder "How could incarnation be expressed in pottery? I mean the God part?" She looked closer at the dirty, muddy mass on the wheel as her hands loved the sides of the gray substance like a lover's hand caressing the beloved. She breathed in the smell of clay and the scent of the Christmas tree. She breathed in the music of the radio and the music of her soul. Her eyes watched the pot intensely as it began to take shape.

Life was good and beautiful for Maddie and she knew the piece of clay in her hand could be a wonderful pitcher; she could feel the clay speak to her. She loved the rough texture of the clay and the softness of the water. The turning of the pot was both a sensuous experience and an exercise in meditation. All the difficulties of life disappeared

and there was only the “now” that was peaceful, loving, and holy. As she shaped and molded clay, she could see the final work begin to show itself to her in her mind’s eye. She began to pray for the person who would eventually own the piece. She wanted to love the clay so that the person could feel love from the vase itself. The energy from the clay and the spirit of Christmas seemed to cause the wheel to glow. This would be her best creation yet. She held her hand gently inside the mouth of the clay pot, sponged some water over the clay to keep

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it wet, and caressed its inside with her hand: the softness of the clay as sensual as flesh, as intimate as a woman. This block of clay was different than most. The small grainy rocks often present in her past batches of clay were not present in this piece. It was almost as if the clay was virginal and pure. She would call this the “Virgin” in honor of Christmas and the Holy Virgin. She was lost in the thrill of creating.

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Pearl had stopped to wipe her brow when she looked up into the eyes of a young woman. Right in front of Pearl stood a woman of about thirty. If that was not shocking enough, at her side was a young girl who appeared to be age three or four. Pearl never could tell the age

of children. Pearl grabbed hold of the counter as she tried to steady herself from a dizzy, sinking feeling. The young mother instinctively reached forward as if she could balance Pearl. In that instant, Pearl regained her composure and her steadiness. Smile. Pearl had to smile. She must not show that her heart was breaking. Sensing Pearl's kindness, the child called out to her,

"Looky what I got from Santa!"

In the girl's small grubby hand, she held up a candy cane with felt reindeer antlers and a red pompon nose. Looking into her eyes, Pearl could see that this child was indeed joyous over such a simple gift and suddenly Pearl remembered her own parents' stories of Christmases during the Great Depression. They often talked about how exciting it was if they got a stick of candy or a piece of fruit.

Grief and sadness pushed up from Pearl's heart, a tsunami of emotion. Holding herself together Pearl said "Try some of cookies at the end of the line. After you eat this turkey, it will be the perfect treat."

The mother of the child smiled graciously and took the plates. Pearl wondered what had happened, why a mother and child were on the street. Pearl watched as they walked to the dessert portion at the end of the counter. As the young mother helped the child with picking out cookies, she looked up. She waved and smiled at Pearl, a smile of



kinship and thankfulness. They were the only two women there now. Pearl never knew that mothers and children could be homeless. Back home, the women and children were important. She had never thought very long about homelessness at all. As she continued serving, she

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found herself keeping her eyes moving between the two places – the table where the mother sat and the door. She wondered how many more women would come. They did come too. No, there were not as many women and children as men at this soup kitchen, but they were there. These were the nameless faces dependent upon the kindness and generosity of another human being.

Pearl felt blessed that she was spending her Christmas Day feeding the homeless. Something inside of her was changing, shifting.

Something inside of her was being softened. In the center of it all, there seemed to be a great joy arising. No sooner had she realized this than she became aware that one of the men was waving something in front of her. “Here’s somethin’ fer ya miss,” said the toothless gent “I carved it m’self out of hick’ry nut wood.” He winked at her and offered her the small carving in his hand. His eyes were bright, and gratitude filled her heart as Pearl thanked the old man. As she looked into the man’s

hands she saw a beautifully hand-carved Mary. Pearl decided this was a true Christmas. The best ever.

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A wonderful aroma awakened Beau. Stretching out like an old hound dog awakening from a nap, he suddenly came to consciousness. He could not believe that he had fallen asleep in his recliner while his guest searched his kitchen for something to eat. He silently cursed himself, but judging from the aroma, Anna must have succeeded in finding something to cook. Rising from his chair, he walked sheepishly into the kitchen half expecting her to curse him for being such an inconsiderate host. Instead, as she looked up from the stockpot he was greeted with a gracious smile and asked, “Do you feel better now?” Beau nodded his head like a guilty and chastised child.

“You must have been exhausted from all of this. You were out like a light.”

“Well,” said Beau “I got up at five o’clock this mornin’ tryin’ to figure out what to fix. I burnt a coupla things before I gave up...right before you got here. I decided to clean up and pray that a miracle would happen. Smells like you performed the miracle.”

Anna blushed “Oh I don’t think it’s a miracle at all but it will be

edible. I mixed some frozen vegetables I found in your large freezer.

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You had some chicken bouillon cubes hidden in the back of your pantry. Mix and you get a quick soup that anyone could make. Hope you like vegetable soup.”

Beau thought that he must have been dreaming to have such a kind woman in his house. She had to be an angel. He wanted to tell her that he loved vegetable soup, that it was his favorite. He hesitated because he had never met anyone like Anna and it had been so long since he had gone out with anyone other than his ex-wife. She might think he was getting fresh. The smell of the soup was too great. He smiled a gracious smile and said “My favorite. Let’s eat.”

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Pearl had never been so tired in all her life, even from hauling hay with her deddy. No, the feeling was not a tired feeling like she felt when working on the farm, though she had certainly done some physical work at the shelter. Her entire being exhausted itself by trying to absorb everything that happened. The compassion meter in her body was pushed into overdrive. She was emotionally drained and at the same time, she had never felt so rewarded in all her life. For once, she

felt that what she had done that morning had made a difference beyond her own existence.

She was excited to return home and hoped that she would have a chance to share her experience with her women's mission group. She wished she had some pictures to show the women like the missionaries who had come to their church before. The only difference between the missionaries' people and these people was that the people at the soup kitchen were not on the other side of the world. They were only one-hour's drive away. As they turned toward home, Pearl looked at the world with new eyes. Now she could recognize the down-and-out as they walked down the street. They stood out, a poignant bas-relief in the landscape of the city, each homeless person on the sidewalk a moving portrait of hardship and despair. "Bring me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free..." At the time, that quote seemed like scripture, though Pearl knew better. Still, it did sound like Jesus, the one called to be a light to the world. She wondered if Jesus ever stood holding up a light like the Statue of Liberty lighting

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that narrow path he talked about with his disciples. "Lord, we could all use a little light for the journey," she found herself praying.

Joe turned into a gas station and Pearl felt the carved Mary in her pocket. The carving fit her hand as if the old man had carved it for her hand alone, the entire experience feeling surreal to Pearl. She wondered why a homeless man would carve a religious figure? Yet, it was clearly Mary, with a babe in her arms. Joe asked Pearl if she needed anything from the store since he needed a pack of cigarettes. She told him she just wanted to sit in the car and think. Joe's old car door squeaked as he opened it and the cold air swooped into the car taking away Pearl's breath. She thought again about the homeless, about the mother and the child that were now back on the street on a cold day. This time Jesus' words did come to Pearl's mind "I was hungry and you fed me...when you did it to the least of these, you did it to me." As Pearl absorbed the events of the day, she wondered if she had ever celebrated a Christmas as truly as she had today. And she had not even gone to church! Her heart filled with the blessings of love, peace and thankfulness, her heart was singing or praying, she wasn't sure which. Joe had only been in the store for a few minutes when Pearl spotted them. The homeless woman and her child rounded the corner checking the pay phone for coins. Pearl felt the carved Mary in one pocket and became aware of the fifty dollars she still had in her other pocket. She moved the money from her purse to her pocket intending

to give it to the woman earlier, but had lost courage. “I was hungry and you fed me...” played in her head as a radio jingle torments a listener. She felt her pulse quicken. “I just fed these hungry people,” she spoke firmly to her heart and mind. The words of scripture circled around her head like the word balloons in cartoons. Only, this was not funny. She had never given money to a stranger...or a friend for that matter and she had few friends. She did not want to embarrass the woman. It was only fifty dollars. What could that do besides pay for one night at a cheap hotel? She looked away as if the action itself would make the woman and child disappear. Her heart raced because she knew what she wanted to do, what she had to do. She reached into her pocket to touch the money once more. She looked to see if the mother and child were still there and saw the mother bend down to adjust the child’s scarf and coat. Pearl took a deep breath as she opened the door. She spoke aloud “Lord help me.” She needed the extra courage. She

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needed all the help she could get. She did not know why she felt so nervous, and yet, so sure at the same time.

Luckily, Joe took a long time in the store looking at snacks and the line in the store was long. Pearl did what needed to be done in the

name of God and goodness. She was still nervous as Joe got into the car. It was not until Joe turned around to back up the car that he saw the mother and child sitting as quiet and frightened as mice in his back seat.

“What in the hell?” Joe exclaimed as he slammed on the brakes.

“Pearl, who is this and what are they doing in my car!”

“Some friends that are going to be staying with me for a while Joe. I don’t want to hear another thing about it.” Pearl spoke calmly and as commanding as possible.

“Pearl I know better. I saw these people at the soup kitchen. You cannot take these people home.” Joe was almost shouting.

“I can do what I want Joe.”

“Not in my car you can’t.” Joe did shout this time and his face was red. The mother began opening the back car door to exit.

“You stay right there little lady,” Pearl demanded and the young woman froze and the little girl began to whimper. Pearl softened her voice and spoke to the child “It’s gonna be okay honey. You and mommy stay right here while I have a talk with Joe.”

“Pearl...” Joe was furious. Pearl knew he could be a hot-head and was going to pull out a rabbit from her hat...though there was no magic involved.

“Joe, just get out of the car. There’s something you need to know.”

Joe thought about it only a second. He didn’t want to scare the kid, but he didn’t trust the mama. Joe turned the car off and stepped out of the car to blast some sense into Pearl. As he shut the car door and approached at the front of the car, Pearl looked different. He couldn’t explain it but she looked taller or something. She also looked fierce. He started to fuss, but before he could Pearl spoke “Joe I know what you did.”

“What do you mean?” he spoke loudly. He was taken aback though “I didn’t do nothin’. You are the one letting strangers into my car.”

The people inside the store began to look at the two of them, but at the same time did nothing but stare. They had seen marital spats before.

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“My mama and deddy might have been farmers, but they weren’t stupid and they kept good records.”

Suddenly the blood drained from Joe’s face. Pearl could see that she had his attention but he protested again, though a little weaker “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” He had to turn his face away at this lie.



“Yeah you do Joe. You might not be the nicest man, but you are an honest one. A lie don’t hide itself so good on you.” Joe cleared his throat, took a deep breath, and said calmer this time,

“I don’t know what you’re talking about Pearl. What would anything about your parents have to do with these strangers in my car anyway?”

“As I see it Joe, you owe me.” She looked him hard in the eyes and they both stared at one another, neither one willing to break the stare. Joe didn’t exactly soften as much as resign himself to seeing that she knew the truth, if only a part of it all. His eyes wandered a bit so Pearl took the opportunity to speak again “Let’s all head on back home and nobody has to know what happened between you and my parents.”

“Just stop. You don’t know what you’re talkin’ about.”

“You sure about that Joe?” She folded her arms in front of her chest, ready to fight.

“God we’re not going to talk about this here,” said Joe “That’s enough. Let’s go.” He said those words as a man resigned to his fate and unsure about Pearl. He didn’t know if she was truly vindictive or if she was merciful, but right now, his business couldn’t afford to find out. If the woman stiffed Pearl, he would simply tell her “I told you so.” His stomach was turning now that Pearl had his number. They

silently returned to get in the car with Joe nervously jingling his keys and Pearl with her arms folded in front of her, a woman holding her ground. When they were in the car Pearl spoke to reassure the two in the back seat. The two hugged together, still a bit afraid of what was happening but Pearl could tell the mother was even more afraid of something else. Joe felt trapped as he backed the car into the highway to drive back home. As they pulled out into the highway, Pearl heard a man yell “Come back here you bitch!” She looked over her right shoulder and saw a man shaking his fist at their car. When she turned to look at the woman in the back seat, the young woman turned to look the other way. It was then that Pearl saw a bruise on the woman’s neck.

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Maddie held the coffee cup in her hands and sipped the hot brew as she contemplated what she had learned. She had taken a break to call a friend who was in seminary and ask, “How can a woman be pregnant and still be called a virgin?” The question sounded like a puzzle, a Buddhist koan, not a Christian concept. The more she thought about it, the more she questioned her own belief in a pregnant

virgin. How could a “virgin” birth a child? She could see her entire creedal faith shake with the question. It was not the first time she had questioned this concept, just the first time she allowed the question to linger in her mind and her conscious intelligence to question.

According to her friend, the ancient word for “virgin” did not necessarily convey the chaste image that is implied in the twentieth century. Instead, it implied a woman of integrity and wisdom. Maddie gazed at the pot on the wheel. How could throwing a pot on a potter’s wheel bring up so much of a question? The pot, turning into a pitcher was such a feminine object with its concave center and the curve of its body. A virgin as a woman of integrity and wisdom was a concept that resonated deep within her and Maddie liked the meaning it could bring to all women’s lives. That interpretation would mean that any woman could answer God’s call to be a Christ-child bearer. Maddie felt a bit like she was participating in a betrayal...or blasphemy. Of course, she was not sure who she felt like she was betraying – the institution of the church, God, or her parents. On the other hand, this new concept was opening her eyes to something. She needed time to think about it more. She looked at the vase on the wheel wondering how to make a pitcher that could capture the essence of this enigma. She stood up to stretch and think some more. She walked farther back from the wheel. She

liked the shape as it was. Clearly, the pitcher's shape was finished. She would apply the handle and the rest would have to be developed in the glaze and firing. She washed up, looked at her creation one more time before taking it off the wheel. She put it on the shelf for the pieces awaiting the first firing. After cleaning up, she decided it was time for a ride on Lightning. She hoped this Christmas Day would last forever.

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A dream came to Leah in vivid colors and wonderful emotions. She had only napped and yet her psyche had delved into a wonderful dream state that she was reluctant to relinquish. But with a shake of Leah's shoulder, her mother, in her persistent manner, brought her back into the real world. No longer was she dreaming of her aunt's farm in Albemarle. She was on her mother's hard couch in Charlotte. Before she sat up, she revelled a while longer in the memory of her aunt.

Behind her aunt's house (her great-aunt really) was an old concrete block building. To anyone who might have driven up to the farm, that small building looked like a plain old tool shed. To the child, Leah, it was a magical house. It was cool, dark, and best of all, it contained a curiosity which few her age had seen – a wringer washer.

Many times, during the summer, Leah stood wide-eyed while her aunt pulled the wet clothes from the washer tub through the machine's white rollers. The rolling part was the best part. She always wanted to get close while the clothes were going through the wringer rollers but at that point her aunt always made her go stand at the door. Even when the machine was off, before the washing process had begun, her aunt would fuss saying "Don't put your hands up there! That wringer'll pull your hands through jest like it pulls through them clothes. Now step back over to the door, ya hear?" Leah would watch the machine until it was finished or she was bored. Then she would walk out mesmerized into a world of color.

As she thought about it, the inside of the washhouse always seemed to be black and white like the black and white photos of her grandparents' youth. Morning sunlight created spotlights on the concrete floors and white metal of the washer. The floors were cool to bare feet and always swept clean. The house smelled of the clean, pure simplicity of life that her aunt lived. When one walked back into the outside yard filled with purples, pinks, and lush green grass, it was as if there were two worlds in one. One world felt black and white but safe, the other was brilliantly colored but fraught with danger. Leah's dream illuminated her present stance in life. As dreams often do, Leah tended

to choose the black and white world of safety rather than taking risks to live in beauty. Often, she ignored the mystery of life to make life in some way controllable, manageable. Somehow, her subconscious wanted her to wake up on another level. She did not want to do that

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right now. Leah relished being in control of her life and wanted things to remain safe and secure. Leah was glad that Christmas was over.

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Beau blushed as he asked, “I’m embarrassed to say this, but what ‘xactly is a yogi?” Anna smiled her gracious smile and responded, “A yogi is a person who practices yoga. I also teach yoga.” Anna paused to see if she needed to explain further. Seeing Beau’s blank reaction incited her to continue “Yoga is like a prayerful type of exercise.”

Finally, a word he could understand and Beau nodded in understanding at the word “exercise.” He was always surprised at what the city slickers could think up – “praying and exercising” was certainly new to him. He was sure that this practice had to be rough on the knees but did not want to ask too many questions, so he changed the subject “Want to go fer a walk?”

As Anna and Beau walked down the dirt road behind his house, a hawk silently flew overhead. Upon seeing it, Beau heard Anna sigh a peaceful sigh. He sure liked this woman. It made him want to sigh peacefully too, which he did. They walked in silence and both breathed

in the crisp country air as the pebbles crunched beneath their feet. A cold but gentle wind blew through the winter wheat. Approaching the pond at the Hatley's old place, a flock of Canada geese took flight. They both laughed as they saw a cow staring intently at them while chewing her cud. Not only were they watching the creation around them, but creation was watching them too. Beau could not remember the last time he was so happy. This was his best Christmas yet.

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When Joe let those women out of his car, he shook his head in disbelief as he drove away. Pearl knew she probably scared him and that as unpredictable as he was, well, she didn't know what to expect at work tomorrow. Shortly after they had gotten on the road Pearl found out that the daughter's name was Rachel and the mother's name was Susan, but after that, no one talked. Each rider had been so nervous on the way home that no one spoke for the entire hour. At

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the trailer, the mother and child stood nervously on the small wooden stoop that led to Pearl's trailer while she fumbled for her keys. The trailer that had seemed so large for one person seemed smaller as the three of them entered the den. "Well, it's not much but it'll do for now,



I hope.” Pearl chattered nervously as she tried to think of what to do next. “Why don’t you two sit down and watch some television while I make the bed in the extra room.” The two sat down as if both were obedient children afraid to be punished or lose something good. Pearl walked to the back and pulled out her other set of sheets. When she had bought the sheets, it had seemed extravagant since she already had a good set, but the good Lord must have known she would need them. As she pulled off the old bedspread, she began to wonder what made her invite two strangers into her little home.

Perhaps it was little Rachel’s blue eyes looking up in trust or the gentle voice of Susan. Did Susan ask to come home with her? Pearl knew that she had not, but could not figure out what had moved her to tell them to come home with her. There was plenty of room in her trailer she had said to them. Pearl picked up the top sheet, shook out the folds then snapped it in the air over the bed. As the sheet floated down her eyes scanned the room seeing that it was probably okay for her two new friends. All those girls needed was a place to sleep while Susan searched for a job. Caught up in her own thoughts Pearl became aware of another’s presence and looked up to see Susan standing in the doorway.

“Can I help?” Susan asked.

Comforted by the thought of having a common task Pearl said,

“That would be great.”

While the two women prepared the room, Pearl became aware of a thankful easiness pervading the room. She was glad that Susan and Rachel would be staying with her. She did not know how things would go, but she was sure that all would be okay. This Christmas surely turned out different than she had expected. What would happen next?

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18 MOVING DAY

“The first day after Christmas, my true love and I had a fight and so I chopped the pear tree down and burned it just for spite...” Leah was singing this song to herself as she buttered her toast for the morning after Christmas. Every year Leah found herself singing this spoof to herself called “The Twelve Days After Christmas” and it somehow lightened her heart from the loneliness. Her students loved the song when she added it to one of the Christmas events. It seemed like Christmas break went on forever.

While other professors seemed to relish the long holiday, for Leah it seemed like a jail sentence. She pretty much stayed at her apartment filled with reminders of her single lifestyle. Everything reminded her

that she was alone. She often hated that she wanted to be in a relationship because it made her feel needy. She knew that she needed to move her spirit toward wholeness while living alone. That would be the ideal goal and preparation for a new healthy relationship one day. That knowledge did not make being alone any easier though. It is one thing to know what one needs to do, quite another to take the necessary steps towards action. She guessed saints could do those things. Of course, that made them saints; they could move towards healing action even when it was hard. Leah looked out the window at the blue sky peeping through the rain clouds. She wanted to break through the grayness of her life too. "I'm getting out of this place today." Maybe she would drive to the school. The road to the college was through the country and that would be a welcome change from the noisy city.

As she drove out of the city, she listened to the calling of her heart. She was not sure where she was heading, only that she needed to go. She needed to be somewhere different. As she drove into the country, she passed an old lumber mill and the scent of freshly cut lumber wafted into her car. The sun shone brighter and heated the car up until she had to open the car window a peep. The drive was a cleansing experience even without knowing her destination. She watched as a

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hawk swooped from the telephone line and into the ditch grabbing lunch then lifting off again.

Leah was glad there weren't many people on the road. She drove slowly, enjoying the journey. The hills of the road sloped and curved with the gentleness of the country. Winter wheat embraced the road, then pine or oak forests. A sign appeared ahead of her that had stirred her curiosity for months "Cline's Antiques." The large wooden sign showed signs of rough weather with its white peeling paint. The letters were less than black but not gray. The worn sign leaned up against a rusted antique tractor. She turned up the washed-out dirt road to discover more.

The driveway was not long and what she saw made her question if she really wanted to continue forward. As she drove up to the place that had to be "Cline's Antiques," she was unsure whether she was approaching an antique barn or a junkyard. Sitting before her were three old tin buildings with the wood weathered gray and brown and the tin colored with rusty spots and holes. The rusted tricycles, old bottles, hubcaps, and weeds would surely host snakes in the summertime.

A blue tick hound and an old man with a scruffy beard were outside the front building. Dressed in faded bib overalls and wearing worn brogan shoes, the man reminded her of Uncle Jed on “The Beverly Hillbillies.” She looked to see if there was anyone else there besides her. There was another car but no other person in sight other than the hillbilly and the dog. Was it safe to get out of the car? The hillbilly and his dog looked toward the car with disinterest and then together went slowly back into the building. She decided to take a risk. The day was too beautiful to be closed up in an apartment or in a car and the quiet of this country pulled her in.

Leah got out of the car and waited to see if the dog would come chasing after her. Nothing happened except that the breeze blew gently and stirred wind chimes in the distance. Leah breathed deeply and savored the fresh, crisp air and shivered as she realized the day was colder than it appeared. She grabbed her gloves and buttoned her coat before carefully locking the car doors. As she walked through the first building, she saw that this was going to be an excellent adventure. Yes, there was junk spattered here and there, but there were many treasures as well. No designer had touched these antiques, only someone who loved to collect and share antiques with others.

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The walls of the barns were covered with old license plates and wooden picture frames. Horse harnesses and old music instruments hung from nails. The floors were stacked with desks, chairs, bottles, and magazines. As she turned the corner from looking at some old furs, her eyes fell upon the hillbilly and the dog. Both appeared to be sleeping in front of the old potbellied stove that was radiating heat at the center of the cold building. Leah wondered if she should speak to avoid startling the man or the dog. She did not want to be shot or bitten. Yet, at the same time, she could think of nothing to say so she cleared her throat and walked quickly by. Neither the man nor the dog stirred and for that, she felt relieved.

She hurriedly exited from the cold building. Moving quickly, she checked out the other buildings and as she did, each building held bigger and better antique surprises. There were old cupboards and beds, washstands and mantles, chairs, and more chairs. There were farming tools, wardrobes, and huge oak bookshelves. There were prices on nothing and she saw several pieces that interested her. As she turned to go back and check on a cabinet she had seen in another building she was startled to hear the old man speak behind her, “Ma’am can I help you with something?” As she let out a startled

gasp, he apologized “Sorry to startle you. I thought you might need assistance.” Leah was shocked at how intelligent he sounded. She realized then that his appearance might disguise the depth of the person.

“Well, I would like to get the price of a cabinet in the second building. Are you Mr. Cline?”

“Yup.” Mr. Cline and the old dog walked slowly and silently with Leah as they walked to the other building. She tried to think of conversation but realized it was unnecessary and enjoyed the quiet walk. The birds began to sing as if it were spring and Leah wished she could take her bulky coat off, but she knew the next building was cold. They walked into the dark and dusty building to the far corner where the light peeked through the slits in the gray boards of wall. She had bought a few antiques in Matthews before and braced herself for the high price she would hear. “You’re interested in that small green cabinet with the distressed look?” asked Mr. Cline. Leah nodded and Mr. Cline offered “I guess I’ll take about sixty dollars for that.”

Leah jerked her head towards Mr. Cline “How much?”

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“Sixty dollars,” repeated Mr. Cline.

Leah tried not to smile too broadly because she didn't want him to raise the price by realizing she was willing to pay twice as much and had expected to hear a price for three times as much. She wondered if he knew how much he could charge for these things in Charlotte. As she handed him the money and saw his faded pants and his old dog, Leah thought "It doesn't matter how much he makes. He's doing what makes him happy." As Cline loaded the small cabinet into her Volvo wagon, she began to ask herself "What would make me happy?" The question puzzled her because she thought that being a professor made her happy, and yet, something was always missing. She looked back towards the barns as Mr. Cline and his dog strolled back to their stations. She wondered how long she would have to look to find the piece missing from her life. Even more puzzling was where to begin her search. The question circled in her mind like a loving riddle as she drove back to her apartment.

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19 PEARL AND RACHEL

"Home Sweet Home."

"Home is where the heart is."

Pearl ran all the clichés about home through her head in the hopes that



it would help. As she lay resting in the early morning, fear and doubt rose in her chest. What did she know about the people in her house? Maybe she was in the beginning stages of Alzheimer's disease. What could make a person take perfect strangers into a safe, quiet home? These two were people from city streets too! She heard movement outside her bedroom and began to worry that they might steal what little she had. She hurriedly slipped on her old bedroom shoes and her tattered housecoat and tried to move nonchalantly into the kitchen. But halfway to her door was a sleepy child with a blanket held close to her head while she sucked her thumb. Rachel's hair looked like Albert Einstein's on a bad day. She walked up to Pearl, stopped right at her feet, and looked up as if making sure that this was a person who could be trusted. They stood there in the hall looking at each other, neither knowing exactly what to do. Then, with complete confidence, Rachel held up her free arm with the child's signal that means "please pick me up."

Pearl had never really been around children. She had raised baby goats, calves, chicks, puppies, and kittens – but she could not think of when she had ever been around a small child other than at church. Therefore, she stood there not knowing what to do. Her heart was filling with an emotion not felt before and it was a warm feeling. As

she stood there lost in that new emotion, Rachel became more insistent and clear with her signal. Rachel took her thumb out of her mouth and reached out both arms to Pearl. She then took those tender child's hands and tugged on Pearl's robe until Pearl finally understood what she was supposed to do. Pearl felt awkward as she bent down to pick up the small angel at her feet. It was going to be okay. Somehow,

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everything was going to be okay. She walked into the kitchen as Rachel laid her head on Pearl's shoulder.

20 Beau Seeks Guidance

Maddie was surprised when she opened her door and found Beau standing there. "Howdy. I was about to knock. Thought I would invite you to lunch. Let's go down to the What-A-Burger," said Beau. This was a surprise. Beau had never asked her to lunch before.

"What's up Beau?" questioned Maddie. Beau looked down at his shoes and shuffled his feet around while Maddie locked her back door. Maddie could sense the nervousness in Beau and was certain she had never seen him this nervous before.

Finally, Beau mumbled "I wanna talk to you about this woman I met. She's nice, but she does somethin' called yoga and I 'awnt to make

sure it ain't nothin' bad, you know like that satanic junk. I cain't exactly talk to my daughters about this."

Maddie tried not to laugh as she visualized Beau dating a person open-minded enough to practice yoga. Now she understood why Beau was at her door. He didn't want to worry his daughter about dating someone other than her mom and Beau also knew Maddie had lived in cities where he said hippies lived.

"Beau, let's compromise. I'll be glad to go to lunch with you today, but how about going to Joe's place instead. I need to check on Pearl. I want to hear how it went with the homeless people yesterday and she's not answering her phone."

"It's a deal," Beau breathed. He did not realize until that moment that he was holding his breath. He hated to ask the opinion of anyone, especially a woman and worse; a lesbian, but Pearl always said that Maddie knew a lot about other religions. Pearl had gone on and on one time when her papa came for a haircut saying Maddie should've been a preacher if women could preach. Talking to Maddie was better than nothing. Yesterday, he looked up yoga in his 1969 World Book Encyclopedias and he thought everything was okay but you never can be too sure when it comes to city slickers. Now the only thing he had

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to hope was that his buddies would not give him heck for having lunch with Maddie. It was the first time he had ever worried about his reputation.

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Joe's had been busy all morning. It was as if the whole town had tired of home cooking and holiday fare and was out to get their fill of cholesterol and grease. Pearl also knew that people from Stanly County were coming into town to go shopping at the Concord Mall, but she couldn't believe how many people were stopping at Joe's. She had worked so hard this morning that her hair was beginning to fall from beneath her hairnet. Pearl usually had time to stop and chat with the customers. Today all she could do was hurry and serve or hurry and cook. She was distracted though.

Skipping out on church for Christmas gave her a feeling of freedom, even if she loved Christmas. She felt like a teenager out on her first joyride. Now that she had two needy people at her home, she wondered if she needed to turn to the church for assistance. They would need clothes that she could not provide and more food than she could take home from the kitchen at Joe's. They would need much more than she could anticipate and Pearl felt the weight of the burden.

What made everything weigh more was that she didn't want to turn to the church. She had just made a break. Maybe all she needed to do was pray about it a little. The people at church never paid her any attention before, why would they help her now?

As if on cue, the kitchen door squeaked open as Preacher Friendly poked his head into the kitchen. His name was not really Preacher Friendly. She had given him that sarcastic name. He always wore his fake grin and proclaimed to love Jesus with a saccharine sweet voice that also seemed to drip venom. In Pearl's opinion, he was a snake hiding in a sugarcoated men's suit. She learned early on to trust her intuition. She knew from the beginning he was a fake. Intuition was one of her gifts, she never could explain it to others. Mama thought the preacher was a hero and Pearl knew better. She called him Preacher Friendly behind his back, only Preacher to his face for his real name was "Goodman," and she could not bear to call him that. He was one

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of the reasons she was glad to leave the church. He was anything but good.

"Pearl, jest wanted to check in on ya," said the preacher. "Missed ya at the Christmas services. It's the fust time you missed in yearahs.

Everythin' okay?"

Pearl tried to hold back the bile that rose in her throat as she spoke  
"Everything's fine and dandy. Just thought I'd try something different  
this year."

Joe walked into the kitchen right then and saw that Pearl's face was  
getting redder, as if building up steam. He thought something  
dangerous would soon happen in that hot kitchen if he did not act.  
Pearl's action yesterday made him realize he didn't know this woman  
and he wanted no trouble at his restaurant. Joe spoke diplomatically  
"Preacher Goodman, I'm sorry to do this, but we're in our rush hour  
I'm going to have to ask you to step back into the dining room."

"Well, I nevuh," exclaimed the preacher and he turned haughtily  
and went back into the dining area.

Joe and Pearl glanced at one another for a moment realizing they  
had something in common. They both disliked that preacher. They  
were still awkward after Pearl's actions towards Joe however, so Pearl  
went back to what she was doing as she said, "It's about time you got  
back here." Joe said nothing, but he did worry a bit and Joe had never  
worried.

§

When Beau and Maddie walked into Joe's, most everyone did a

double-take glance at the two. Their entrance together caught everyone off-guard. They looked like a comedy show “The Odd Couple,” or “Abbot and Costello.” The only difference is that the title of the comedy would have been “The Lesbian and the Barber.” Being a person who usually felt comfortable anywhere, Maddie was uncomfortable seeing the people stare at the two of them as if they were a couple. She felt her anger rise as she restrained herself from making a snide comment. She did not want to make matters worse, especially with Pearl working here. This was the only thing bad about living in a small town: everybody knows your business and if they don’t, they are nosey enough to find out.

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Maddie wanted to keep her cool for Pearl’s sake. She loved Pearl and knew that she was finally finding her own calling in life by working at Joe’s. Maddie had always known that Pearl was a special woman. Now the people of the town would be finding that out too, that Pearl was more than her parents’ caretaker. Pearl was no longer hidden behind the overalls of her dad or the apron of her mother. Finally, she was making a life for herself as well as becoming known as the best cook in town. Heck, she was probably the best cook in three counties.

Maddie was as proud of Pearl as she would be of a child of her own. She wanted to see Pearl happy today more than to put these people in their place. She held her tongue and did not cut anyone down to size. Beau was surprised at how hot Joe kept his restaurant. He felt sweat gathering in his palms and on his brow. He was far too concerned with the room's temperature to see how many people stared at the two. He waved at his customers and laughed his good-natured laugh, albeit the laughter sounded a little nervous even to him. This might not have been the best idea to come out with Maddie. However, he did not want to talk about his love life in the barbershop. That would have been ultimate disaster. He never talked about his divorce, why should he talk about anything else. When the divorce became final some of his customers would ask "I hear you got a divorce?" Beau would answer "Yep." That was the end of the conversation. Beau was not one to discuss his personal life with anybody, which is why it was so unusual that he wanted to talk to Maddie about Anna. The subject of her being a yogi continued to bother him. It bothered him enough to make him try and not think about her, but he liked Anna and that was different. Now he only had to make sure that the yoga stuff wasn't evil. While he was no longer a churchgoer, he also knew better than to mess with anything that hinted of evil. It was always better to be safe than sorry.



§

Pearl was wearing out. She wished there was more help at Joe's because she couldn't keep up with the cooking and the waiting tables. She had a great idea.

"Joe, can you hire Susan to wait tables?"

"Who's Susan?"

"The young woman at my house."

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"Now Pearl you don't know that woman."

"I know you need help and she needs a job. We could ride into work together until she gets her a car. You could even take a day or two off while I cook."

Pearl could see that Joe liked the idea of a day off. Since he was the owner and the main cook it seemed he worked all the time and Joe was ten years older than Pearl. He liked to be in control though. In the short time Pearl had worked for him, she could tell that much. He wasn't particularly mean about anything, just wanted perfection. She respected him for that. One thing she was certain of though. Pearl knew she cooked better fried chicken than him.

"Come on Joe. What would it hurt?"

"How do I know I can trust the woman? I'm not like you and right now, I don't think you're being too smart. Some strange woman..."

"A young woman with a child, Joe!"

"Alright. I'll give her a chance but only because I know you will make up for any messes she creates. I mean that financially too Pearl. I can't afford to be robbed."

"She won't rob you. I'll make sure of that."

Pearl was not even sure herself why she trusted Susan so much. It may be because of the child. Just thinking that Susan would have a job to support her and the baby made Pearl breathe a little easier. She could bring her into work tomorrow and then Pearl could focus on the food. Joe would see that Susan would work.

§

Leah pulled out of Cline's Antiques and headed back towards Charlotte. She was excited about her adventure and the new furniture. She wished she had eaten something before coming out. She passed a lumberyard, an old hotel, and then saw a sign "Joe's Cafe - Homemade Cooking" on the left. As Leah waited at the light, she thought the food had to be good because the parking lot was filled. In fact, the lot was so packed she doubted they would have any tables there. She wondered what the town was like. She saw a sign pointing left "Pleasant Quarry"

was one mile away. When the light changed, she thought she would check out the town. This might be the perfect place to move to since it was closer to the university than Charlotte, but still far enough she wouldn't run into students.

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She passed a funeral home on the left and then she saw the stoplight ahead. The corner had an old 76 station on one corner, an old pharmacy on the adjacent corner and then empty buildings on the opposing side of the street. She turned left to see how far the town expanded or if this was just the beginning. She drove about a half mile before the town stopped at an Ace Hardware store. She turned back towards the stoplight. When she got to the light, she turned left again past the 76 station. The town only lasted one block this time. As she turned around in the Post Office parking lot, she saw an old Victorian house with an "Apartment for Rent" sign out in the front. She jotted the number down and hoped she could find a phone booth.

At the light, she turned left again and saw that there was a small grocery tucked behind the pharmacy. She had overlooked it earlier. An older woman in a flowered, cotton dress walked out of the pharmacy. Leah smiled at the square patent leather purse on the woman's left arm.

Her grandmother always carried a purse like that and seeing one always gave her a warm feeling. There was a local video store beside of the pharmacy and then a What-A-Burger. It too was packed but Leah saw vehicles leaving so maybe she could grab a burger here. She once loved to go to What-A-Burger with her aunt when she visited her in Albemarle. She decided to try the place in memory of her aunt. Inside, the place was packed with mostly older folks sitting at the few tables. At one table, a young businessman sat alone. The line seemed to move quickly since it was clear that the construction workers and the farmers only stopped in for take-out. She heard the sweaty man in front of her order a cherry-lemon-Sundrop and felt like a child again. She remembered going with her friends down to Barbee's Grill when her parents lived in Oakboro. They would always get cherry-lemon-Sundrop. Some of her friends added pickles. Leah never understood pickles as something good to eat much less to put into a drink. Oh, what a fun day! First, she had found the antiques and now cherry-lemon-Sundrop! She decided on the spot that from now on she would treat herself to a cherry-lemon-Sundrop on the way home from her classes even if she didn't move here.

After she placed her order, she looked around for a place to sit, but all the tables were taken. The young man she had noticed earlier said

"I'm about to finish if you want to go ahead and sit here. These tables fill up fast."

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She smiled. "Why thank you. I think I will."

He put out his hand. "My name's Rick. I work at the library down the street."

"Hi, I'm Leah." She shook his hand tentatively.

"So, what's a pretty lady like you doing in our town?"

Leah's heart beat in nervousness. She was afraid she had fallen into a trap. She did not want this young man coming on to her. She hoped that he had told the truth and had to go soon. His burger was gone and only a few fries. She hated it when she was too trusting.

"Oh, I just stopped at Cline's Antiques and was on my way back to Charlotte."

"Cline's is the best place to look for good finds. He has people from Matthews and Charlotte come out here all the time and there's a high turnover of antiques. Then shop owners take those things back to Charlotte and jack up the price to almost double what they paid."

Rick neatly folded up the hamburger paper, then took a clean napkin and wiped his side of the table as he prepared to go. Leah was

glad he was leaving and then thought to ask, "Do you know about that apartment across from the Post Office?"

"Oh yes, that belongs to Mrs. Berringer. It's a great apartment at an affordable price. Mrs. Berringer is hard to deal with, but it's a great place to live."

"Is there a public phone somewhere nearby?"

"There's one at the library which is just a block down the road. Not that we call them blocks here but it's about that far. Here's my card if you're back in town. Have a good lunch."

Rick got a mischievous grin onto his face as he stood and pulled his card from his wallet. He winked at her as he set it on the table. Leah tried not to roll her eyes that the guy was trying to pick her up in such a short time. She wished she hadn't asked about the apartment now.

"Bye," she said dryly, hoping he would know she wasn't interested.

"49!" called the cook at the restaurant window.

Leah picked up her food and went back to the table. She started to move the card Rick had left and then she had to laugh. The card wasn't a personal business card but a card from Scorpio's, the gay bar in Charlotte. There was no name on the card. It was just Rick's way of saying "You're safe with me." Talk about relief, but then she worried if she was dressed too much like a dyke for him to notice her like that.

She hadn't worn makeup for a change. Now she felt vulnerable in a

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room full of people she knew would be conservative. She hurriedly gulped down her food and got the heck out of town.

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## 21 FINDING A SITTER

Susan and Rachel watched cartoons part of the morning after Pearl had left. It seemed too long since Rachel had time to be a child, simply watching cartoons. Rachel had been through so much in her little life. First, she was deserted by her real father and then, the most recent boyfriend was abusive. Susan would have left earlier if she had found a place to stay, but she didn't want to stay in a shelter. She was saving money for her own apartment on a safer side of town. When the drunken fool took her car and all her savings the week before Christmas, she knew she needed to make some kind of change before he came back. He was mean when he was sober and meaner when he was drunk.

She lost her job with the temporary agency because she wasn't there on Christmas Eve and didn't call in to work. She didn't have enough

money for the bus to get to work and even if she had money for the bus, she couldn't afford to pay a sitter. The landlord where she lived with Rod was more of a bastard than the ex-boyfriend was. That Christmas Day, Susan was going to walk to her mom's house in South Charlotte and beg her parents to forgive her and to save their only grandchild if nothing else. She didn't know what else to do. Rod had shut her off from all her friends. It was sad how much damage she had allowed him to do in eight months.

Since she and Rachel were hungry, she knew there would be a special meal that day at the Rescue Center. She hoped no one she knew would be there, but it would be the only way she could make the long walk to her mom's since she had nothing and she knew she would have to carry Rachel most of the way; though if one of her mom's friends had been there perhaps they would have given her a ride. A woman she worked with had been serving at the shelter that day and offered them a ride home, but Susan would have been doubly embarrassed for the woman to know her circumstances and then see where her parents lived. Susan then started east in the opposite direction from where the

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woman was going so that she would drive away and let Susan deal with



her pride in her own way. The woman didn't persist of course. Who would if they thought they were going to have to drive into the hood? Susan wasn't sure if it was a curse or a blessing to be at Pearl's house. At least she and Rachel were safe and Rod couldn't find them at Pearl's. This would give her some time to think about what to do next.

Susan felt Rachel relax into her lap. She began to stroke Rachel's hair until the child fell sound asleep. Susan pointed the remote and turned off the television. The place was nice and clean for a trailer. There was little decoration and only the bare minimum of furniture. She wondered about Pearl's story, why she would take two strangers into her home. Gosh, she hoped that Pearl wasn't some drug dealer. She looked too clean and seemed too nice though. Did drug dealers cook meals for the homeless? She doubted it. Susan felt ashamed. Her love of bad boys ruined her life and now the only good thing was this child. Morning sunlight shone into the trailer's kitchen like it was hope, but Susan was afraid to hope. She leaned her head back on the couch so as not to awaken Rachel and fell into a troubled sleep.

Rachel woke up hungry, climbed down from her mother's lap and walked to the refrigerator. She tried opening the door but the seal was so strong that she couldn't pull it open like the one at the previous place. She began to whine. Susan moved quickly to her and asked what

was wrong and Rachel pointed at the refrigerator. It was only at that moment that Susan realized she had not asked Pearl if they could eat anything and it was close to one o'clock. Opening the refrigerator to see what food Pearl had, Susan saw that there was plenty of bologna. Surely, she would be okay if they took two pieces of bologna and promised to repay her. She got a plate down, cut up the bologna for Rachel, and put her piece on another plate wondering if two slices of bread would be okay so she could make a sandwich. Rachel began grabbing at the bologna.

"Wait sweetie. We need to say our thanks. Remember?" Susan put her hands together and then Rachel did the same. Together they prayed "God is great. God is good. Let us thank him for our food. By his hands, we are fed. Give us Lord our daily bread."

Susan sent up another prayer that she would somehow find a job and that she could repay Pearl. She reverently opened the bag of Wonder

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Bread, took two slices, and then decided she would clean house for Pearl. Once that was done, she would pull weeds or something. She had to make herself useful.

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Maddie was glad that her conversation with Beau was through. He could have just asked her on the phone what he needed to ask. Maybe he was lonely because she didn't really think him to be dumb, just stubborn and life had to proceed as he thought it should. She reiterated to him that a yogi was not anything bad. It didn't take long until she became frustrated. When they both got flustered, Maddie decided she had another appointment. She didn't, but she couldn't deal with the noise of the cafe or Beau's huffing and puffing. She wanted some of the homemade banana pudding on the menu just in case Pearl had made it. Maddie tried to catch her attention but Pearl was busy. Pearl was cooking more each day. Maddie could see she was too busy to chat. The dessert was a favorite of the townsfolk so it would be available on another day. Maddie left a tip since Beau paid for lunch and headed to Pleasant Quarry.

Maddie stopped by the library to return her books and look for another good read. She wished that they carried Rita Mae Brown's works or some of Mae Sarton's, but this was a branch library in the county. She would have to go into the city to get any good lesbian fiction. The library was busier because of the holiday and since it was still the time nearest the lunch hour. Inside she placed her book of poetry into the return bin and headed for fiction. She did not want to

read anything romantic and needed a break from non-fiction. She wished she had stopped by The Little Professor Bookstore when she was shopping in Charlotte.

As she walked down the aisle, she couldn't believe how old the titles were. Soon Rick came around the corner.

"Hey Mad. How are you?"

"Bored with romance and non-fiction. Got any suggestions?"

"Do you like mystery?"

"Sure, as long as it's not too gory. Gory stuff ends up in my dreams."

"Well that rules out the new Koontz novel. *Intensity* is intense on several levels. How about something by Grisham or Higgins Clark?"

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"Let's go with Grisham."

Rick walked around the shelving unit and pulled out *The Runaway Jury*.

As the two of them walked to the front desk, Rick quietly said,

"Too bad you're tired of romance. I just met a hot dish at the What-A-Burger who might be moving in to town."

"Good for you. You can have all the romance you want."

"Not for me girl, for you."

"In this town? Who?"

"No. I think she's from Charlotte. She asked about Mrs. Berringer's apartment and I think her name was Lisa. Of course, I'm never good with names."

"Well I'm not interested. My friends tried setting me up with someone over the holidays and that didn't work out. I guess I'm just not made for relationships."

"Who said anything about relationships?" Rick winked as he stamped the book.

"You ain't right Rick. See you later."

"Happy New Year."

As Maddie returned to her Jeep, she wondered again about Leah. It had been a long time since Maddie had been with anyone. She wasn't the type who could pick up women just for sex. She could tell that she and Leah had chemistry and wondered what she did wrong that kept Leah from coming over to the House Blessing or at least calling. Wait. She knew. It was the religious thing, she was sure of it. Maddie always felt caught between two worlds where she didn't quite fit in either place. She was religious as a child. After college, she tried to move towards being more spiritual, especially after her friend Katherine had disowned her as a friend because she went to church. Still, her thoughts

and her talk tended to be theological and even when toned down, she was still of a spiritual nature. She probably should have been a preacher. What lesbian would be with her? She knew why Leah had not called back.

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The lunch rush hour was over with only a few folks chatting at the tables. Joe called out "Folks you just keep on a talkin'. I'm going to lock the door so we can start cleaning up and calling it a day." The man

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at one table just nodded his head, but the people at other tables began to gather their things to go. One woman walked out the door and stood outside looking at the high school across the road.

"Really, no need to hurry. We close at two but it will take a while to get the kitchen cleaned up."

"We need to be on our way to Asheboro anyway," said the man. Or was it a man? Joe couldn't tell. Of course, it was a man. He had on a work shirt and had his billfold in his back pocket. His face just seemed different from most men's. Joe took his money and watched the man's movements. Joe thought people were interesting, which is part of why he wanted to run a restaurant. He loved to watch people. He was

usually a good judge of character too and something felt off with this man. He didn't seem dangerous, just that something was off. Joe felt the same way about Susan. He knew that Pearl was a good judge of character, but after all his work in the restaurant he had a certain feel about folks he knew to trust. If there was any red flag in his mind or suspicion in his gut, he knew to trust it, though he couldn't explain it to others.

"Here's your change. Come again."

"I'll do that." The man folded his money and put it back in the brown wallet. He seemed to be lingering a minute, then took a toothpick from the metal toothpick holder. Joe decided to guard the cash register until the man left.

"Give my regards to the cook."

The man looked behind Joe through the kitchen window as if trying to catch Pearl's eye but she was busy washing down the counter and did not look up. The man turned to walk out. Joe followed him to unlock and then relock the door. He stood at the glass door to watch the man get into a truck that looked like a delivery truck but it was unmarked. Joe watched the man, but the man didn't pay any attention to Joe as he slowly fastened his seatbelt, started the truck, and then pulled slowly back onto highway forty-nine. The woman on the

passenger side was picking her teeth and looking at Joe.

"Somethin' botherin' ya Joe?" asked the old man at the table.

"Nah. Just being nosey. How did you like Pearl's cooking today?"

"That's the best chicken 'n' dumplin's I had since my wife died. I'd marry her m'self but I'm too old." The old man laughed with a cough and then said "While yer up, let me outta here too. It's past my nap time."

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"See you Bill."

Joe locked the door after Bill and then cleaned off both tables. As he took the plates back to the dishwasher, he asked Pearl,

"Did anything seem odd to you about that man that just left?"

"Bill?"

"No, not Bill. That man sitting with the woman with the bouffant hairdo."

"Can't say that I saw either of them. I was busy cleaning up." She was also worrying that Susan may have robbed her of everything she had but she didn't want to say that to Joe. Besides, it wasn't as if she had much anyway. "Why?"

"Aw I guess I'm just having a suspicious day."



Joe put the dishes into the steaming dishwasher while Pearl took a container of clean soapy water out to wash down the tables. Soon the place was clean and swept and the day was done by three o'clock. Pearl couldn't wait to get home and get off her feet. She hoped that the leftovers from the day would be enough for the girls. She sure didn't feel like cooking after nine hours of work. Joe would have to pay her better if she was going to be the cook. She wasn't sure when she became so brazen and confident. She talked to Joe just like her deddy would have; upfront without mincing words. Joe had better come through with a raise since she was giving up her waitressing job to Susan. He knew he owed her, even if she didn't know why.

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Beau got up from his nap at two and started working on his cars at the barbershop at three. It seemed no one ever came to the barbershop at that time of day. He wasn't far away if they did because his car shed was behind the barbershop. He didn't know why he was feeling so tired lately. His daughters kept asking him if he thought it was because he was seventy-two but he didn't think that was it at all. His deddy had been a hard worker until way into his nineties. He wiped the grease off his hands before walking back into the barbershop. He stomped the dirt off his feet then hung his coat on the rack. Walking behind his

barber chair, he looked into the mirror to make sure he wasn't sweaty from working on the cars. He washed his hands, combed his hair, and then sat down in his barber chair to wait for a customer.

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His thoughts turned to Anna. After talking to Maddie, he felt a little annoyed for being paranoid. Maddie only confirmed what he had read in the encyclopedia. He knew he was looking for an excuse to stop pursuing Anna and at the same time, he had been lonely. He had really loved his wife even though they argued. He never minded a good argument and she seemed to love it. He still didn't understand why she had lived with him forty-five years and then decided to go “find herself”. What can you find out about yourself when you're sixty-five? He guessed retirement gave her too much time to think about all that she had missed. She had wanted to be a professional piano player but her parents would have none of it. She went to secretary school and did what was expected of her.

Now that he thought about it, her decision not to pursue her piano playing was a little bit sad. She was as talented on the piano as those folks on television. She had led the junior choir at church and played for their daughters to sing. They sounded so good together and

sometimes he would add in a little baritone. How odd. After three years of not arguing, he still missed his wife. He gazed into his memories. The sound of tires on the gravel brought him out of reverie. He hopped up, toweled off the seat of the chair. Took a swig of the Cheerwine he had set on the counter so that his back was to the man who walked in for a haircut. He turned back around with a jolly smile "How ya doin' today Tom?"

§

Leah finally took the time to stop at the Buffalo Ranch after the burger. Her parents had taken her and her sister to the ranch when they were kids. They loved to ride the stagecoach and see the chicken that could play the piano. There was now a small petting zoo in addition to roaming buffalo and one zebra. She loved the smell of the saddles in the shop and the sight of all the cheap plastic toys. She almost bought a cheap bullwhip as nostalgia embraced her. A boy in the neighborhood brought one to their house once when they played cowboys and Indians. She picked the whip up and felt the weight of it in her hands. The memory of children trying to pick up sticks with a cheap bullwhip made her smile. She put the whip back on its stand. She had no need for a whip at her age.

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By the time Leah got back to Charlotte, it was almost rush hour traffic. She had forgotten it was the day after Christmas and started down Old Charlotte Road to Eastland Mall. She didn't want to shop but maybe she would ice skate or people watch. As soon as she neared the mall, there was a traffic jam. She started thinking about the apartment in Pleasant Quarry. She called right after she left the What-A-Burger. Mrs. Berringer only wanted a hundred and fifty dollars per month. She could save a lot of money towards a down payment on her own house if she moved there.

She wasn't sure about the country though. Rowan University was still associated with the Methodist church so she couldn't be open and out at work. People can be nosey in small towns and that is one of the many reasons why her parents had moved from Oakboro to Charlotte. She wished she knew someone from Concord to interrogate about Pleasant Quarry. She liked being out and open in the city. St. Peter's was supportive of all gays and lesbians. Could she move to the country? Her car moved another foot in the traffic and she thought to herself that she could do without this part of city life!

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Pearl couldn't believe her eyes when she got home. She always kept

the trailer neat but it was sparkling in every corner when she got home. She placed the container of dumplings on the counter and wondered where the girls were. She saw the door to the guest bedroom was closed and went to knock on the door. She heard crying just as she started to knock, paused, and decided to change clothes first. She knew Susan had to have heard her. You can hear everything in a trailer. She put the dumplings in the fridge and walked back to her bedroom. She took off her uniform and put it in the hamper. She needed to wash clothes tonight but she was so tired. She took a quick shower and pulled on her polyester pants and a loose tee shirt. As she put on her slippers she heard little feet running through the trailer and as soon as she opened her door Rachel grabbed her legs saying "Mamaw!" "No, I'm not mamaw. I'm Pearl." She laughed. Pearl couldn't help herself.

"Purr?" Rachel practiced as she looked up, but she didn't let go.

"Pearl."

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"Purrl."

"Rachel let Pearl go." Susan reached down to pick her up and Rachel turned laughing into her mom's arms. Susan's face was red and

when she talked her nose was stuffy from crying.

"I'm sorry Pearl. She got out the door before I realized."

"No bother." Pearl folded her arms across her chest but was still smiling "Let's eat some dumplings." As they moved towards the kitchen, there was a happiness leading them that Pearl had not experienced before.

"Susan, thank you for spiffing up the trailer. It looks amazing. You cleaned it just like I had hoped to clean it but have been too worn out from cooking and waiting tables."

"I just want to do something to repay you. I'm not sure how I'm going to get a job out here."

"Good news! Joe is going to give you a chance to wait tables so I can focus more on cooking, which is what I love."

There was an awkward pause. Susan looked at Rachel with a concerned mother's expression. The happiness of the moment vanished into the fear of the unknown and the need of a mother to protect her child.

"Oh yes," said Pearl "I wondered how we were going to work that too. There's a day care at the Lutheran church here but I don't know if they charge and even if it was free, I doubt we could make arrangements by tomorrow morning. Joe wants you to start first thing

at six a.m. and we have to make this work. I'm going to be blunt with you; I can't afford to feed three of us."

"I understand totally and I will do whatever is necessary but I do want Rachel to be safe. It's why I was out at the shelter yesterday." She stopped, not knowing if she should say more to Pearl.

Susan wondered if she could call her parents and asked for money for a car or daycare but they had basically disowned her when she had gotten pregnant with Rachel. She had not seen or heard from them in three years. Part of that was Susan's fault because after the fourth move she stopped calling them. She talked with her sister months into the pregnancy but it was so awkward that soon she lost touch with her sister too. She knew that was not how her sister wanted it but Susan allowed her pride to get in the way. Pearl broke Susan's moment of thinking with a suggestion.

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"I'll call my dear and trustworthy friend, Maddie. She's a potter so her schedule will be more flexible than other workers will, unless she has a show and since it's the weekend that's a possibility. How about you warm up the dumplings while I call her? We have to get this worked out today."

Pearl had another phone in her bedroom and went back for privacy in case Maddie wanted to argue again that this was nonsense. She had already argued with Maddie when telling her that she had guests. She knew that Maddie was protective of her and that she had not met Susan or Rachel yet. But Pearl believed Susan was a good person and that if she could just get on her feet, everything would be okay. Besides, she was falling in love with Rachel. Pearl once wanted children until finding out that she would never be able to have them. A pain thick and sharp as a spear went through her heart. She had to make this work. If nothing else, she would call Mrs. Burris at the church and see if she could watch her. She was spry for eighty years, but Maddie would be better.

Pearl's memory began to dredge up the pain of the past while the phone on the other end rang. Pearl picked up the base of the telephone holding it in her left hand as she began to pace to push the memories back down. Where in the world was Maddie and why didn't she have her answering machine on? Pearl was about to hang up when Maddie answered, clearly out of breath.

"Hello."

"What have you been doing?"

"Well hello to you too Pearl. I was out with Lightning and only



heard the phone as I neared the house."

"Maddie, do you have a show or presentation this weekend?"

"No. It's going to be slow until after the New Year. Why?"

"Is there any chance you could baby sit Rachel tomorrow so that Susan can start work at Joe's? Please."

There was a pause as Maddie considered. Today it was Beau wanting to talk; now it was a request to baby sit. If she wasn't careful, the list of favors would grow until she didn't have time to do her work. The country folk never really saw her work as work since it was creative.

"Maddie, are you still there?"

"Yes, I'm still here."

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"Are you mad at me?"

"No, I'm not mad. Just don't tell anyone and I can only do it this ONE day. You know how I've talked to you about people thinking that I don't work because I'm a potter."

Pearl was a little hurt that Maddie would lump her into that group of people since she was the one who encouraged Maddie to pursue an artistic career.

"I'm sorry Pearl," Maddie could hear the heavy sigh "I know you're not that way. Please forgive me."

"Of course I'll forgive you. I'm just overwhelmed at the moment.

What was I thinking?"

"You were thinking with your heart and it's one of the many things I love about you. How about I come over this evening to meet the little girl and her mom?"

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. You know I would do anything for you."

"Then come over and eat some dumplings with us."

"I have to shower first. I smell like the barn. You go ahead and eat and I'll be over when I'm fresher."

The three at the trailer had finished eating when Maddie knocked on the door. She usually walked into Pearl's while she was knocking, but she didn't want to scare Pearl's guests. Pearl looked out the window and saw Maddie's Jeep under the utility light. She opened the door.

"Come on in."

Rachel was shy at first around Maddie, but after Maddie played hide-and-seek with her, she began to warm up to her. They all went to the living room and Maddie got down on the floor while the other adults sat on the couch. They were discussing the plan for the next day

and how to coordinate schedules. Maddie was up at five every morning anyway to feed the horse and clean the stall. She was glad she only had one horse right now. The adults talked and laughed. Before long, Rachel was sitting in Maddie's lap. After the adults had worked out the logistics, Maddie asked,

"Where are the diapers and bottles?"

"She doesn't need them. I've got her juice cup in the bag." Susan replied. Her face blushed because she knew that she was going to have to ask for help again and now in front of both of these strangers trying to be friends. "I'm so embarrassed Pearl, but I need to ask if you could

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help me get another box of cheerios and more juice before tomorrow comes. I'll pay you back from the tips I get tomorrow."

"Do you have enough for tonight?" asked Maddie.

"There is enough for tonight and first thing in the morning. Pearl, we used most of your Cheerios today. Sorry."

"That's okay. Honey, you got to tell me these things. I've not been around children. I didn't have brothers or sisters either, so no nieces or nephews," or grandchildren Pearl thought to herself.

"I'll stop by Ted's on my way home and get those things for you. I

better go now though because he closes at seven." Maddie looked down at the cutie in her lap "I've got to go now Rachel. Can we play tomorrow?" Rachel was sucking her thumb while grinning as she nodded her head "yes" but she made no effort to move.

"Come here, Rachel." Susan kneeled to pick her up from Maddie. She gently pulled Rachel's thumb out of her mouth. "It's time to take a bath anyway." Susan thanked Maddie and walked back to her room, humbled by kindness. Tears started to roll down her face. Rachel touched one of the tears with her free hand and her smile turned to a frown at the sight of her mom crying again. Then, as children often do, she suddenly threw both arms around her mama's neck and squeezed all the love she could into her mommy.

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Leah felt restless. After she cleaned her apartment and took a long bath, she tried reading. She could not focus. She would love to be working in her office at the college but it was too far to drive. The campus would be deserted because of the holiday break and she could get a lot of work done on the book she was writing about women composers. She picked up the paper with the information about the

apartment in Pleasant Quarry. The town was only fifteen to twenty minutes from Rowan University. It would be perfect, wouldn't it? She placed the paper back on the oak table, stood up and looked out the window to think. She loved the anonymity of the city and that she could be open. She rarely had time to get together with friends because everyone was busy building up professional lives.

After pacing the floor, Leah stopped to stare out the window. The cat became concerned, hopped into the chair beside Leah and meowed. Leah continued to stare so Ms. Cookies stood up on the ladder-back chair and reached a paw out to touch her mama. Leah smiled down at the cat "I'm okay, sweetie." She petted Ms. Cookies on the head and then looked out the window to the street below. The "will work for food" man was back on his corner. He showed up often. His new white tennis shoes glowed neon white in the grayness of the day. Leah had once taken a bag of food to him to see what would happen. She made sure to use packages that were individually wrapped. She added some cans of soda, and pop-top tuna she had on hand. She also added plastic utensils and paper towels in case the cans were messy. After she gave the bag of food to him, she drove the long way home so that he wouldn't see where she lived. It took less than five minutes for her to get back to her apartment. He was back on the

corner with his sign and the bag of food nowhere to be found. He only wanted the money. A few weeks later, she had seen him at another busy intersection begging. He was never as shabby as the other homeless people who shuffled around downtown. The thought of it all depressed her. There was nothing she could do to change their condition. The homeless people, the sadness of those without enough,

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the challenge of seeing drug deals on the street depressed her; made her feel insignificant.

She realized it might be good for her to get out of the city for a while. She needed a change. She looked down at the cat who still stared curiously at her "Want to move to the country?"

§

Friday morning Maddie arrived at Pearl's at five thirty with a bag full of groceries she thought Susan could use. Rachel was still asleep and Susan looked nervous, but excited. Maddie was glad for the chance to read some of the professional journals she had in the Jeep until Rachel awakened. Pearl hugged Maddie's neck hard after she placed the bag of groceries on the bar.

"Thank you so much Maddie. You know I'll pay you back. There's

some bacon beside the stove, my hash brown casserole is in the oven so it will be warm. I didn't want to cook any eggs because who likes cold eggs. Well, we better go so we won't be late for Susan's first day."

A look of fear passed over Susan's face as she thought about leaving her baby with Maddie. What did she know about her really? She should suck it up and beg her parents to help them, but it would be worse to call them and then for them to be hateful to her and the baby. Susan felt that her father would help, but it was hard to get hold of him since her mother always answered the phone. She took a deep breath and resigned herself to this new journey.

"Call me if she's afraid or if the least thing goes wrong."

"I promise." Maddie looked into Susan's eyes with as much compassion and assurance as possible. She knew that Susan was afraid. She wondered what had happened to bring her here and in that moment, she knew that Pearl had done the right thing.

"Pearl, I'll call St. John's today and see if there's a way to work out childcare for next week. Do you guys have to work Saturday and Sunday?"

"Goodness," said Pearl "we do have to work on Saturday. Joe is always closed on Sunday. I'm so used to going in to work all the time I didn't think about asking for help for Saturday." Pearl's face was

wrinkled with concern. "We got to go now." Maddie grabbed Pearl's arm,

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"Don't worry. I'll help tomorrow too. I love you, Pearl."

"Thank you, Maddie," and she smiled a grateful smile and rushed out the door.

At the restaurant, Susan was excited about waitressing again. She had worked as a waitress throughout high school and found that she loved serving people. The sun had not yet risen so the five-minute drive was dark and cold. She thought it smelled like snow when she went out. She hoped that it would wait until she had made a little money. When the two of them arrived at the restaurant, the place was dark. They sat in Pearl's old truck waiting for Joe to show up. He arrived a minute or two later. He got out of his van still stumbling from sleep. His hair was still wet and he wore an old barn jacket. Pearl and Susan walked quietly from the car and Susan wondered if they were going to talk to each other. She timidly said, "Good morning." Joe mumbled back "Morning."

Joe turned the lights on and he came alive inside the restaurant. Pearl was excited about being able to focus on cooking. They had to get



breakfast hopping because the folks would be coming in soon. Joe reached below the cash register, grabbed an apron and a note pad for Susan. He ran through what he expected and she listened politely even though she knew what to do and knew she was good at it. Once he had completed his rules, he commanded,

"Now make sure the napkin holders are full and check the salt and pepper shakers. Make sure we didn't miss anything yesterday. I'll go help Pearl - get everything ready before the crowd descends."

Friday and Saturday were always the busiest days. It seemed like everyone came out of the woodwork on those two days. Joe didn't want to admit that he was excited to have additional help. He kept trying to hire the teenagers from the high school but they were not dependable and did not like the mornings at all. His last waitress had eloped with a trucker shortly after Pearl started. He had thought she was too old for such nonsense, but what did he know about women?

When he got into the kitchen, he saw that Pearl already had the country ham on the grill and the first batch of biscuits in the oven. He decided to make sure the ketchup and mustard bottles were filled for lunch.

Pearl was in such a rush yesterday to get out. He didn't want to admit that he was nervous about the changes. Instead he convinced himself that it wouldn't hurt to be ahead of schedule. Once he had finished the

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task, he went to open the door and greet the customers. Bucky and his crew of workers were the first in to eat breakfast.

"Mornin' Joe. Who's that purty thang over there?"

"That's my new waitress and she's not a thang. Don't mess with her now. I don't want you scaring off my help."

"Mornin' little lady. I'm harmless, but ya might have to watch out for my fellers."

Susan blushed but smiled. She knew she could charm a tip out of this old man. When the other men came in she could tell they wouldn't mind either. Sometimes it was good for a woman to know how to use her looks.

Joe watched the interactions between Susan and his customers and smiled. She looked livelier than before. He started to go back to the kitchen to cook as usual but Pearl had it under control. He turned to see if Susan needed help and she was already coming up with some orders.

"Did you get tables two and three yet?"

"No. Just that first crew."

"Pearl – Roger, Dean and Max are here for their regular stuff. Beau

is here at his table. Now listen Susan, Beau can be a bit ornery but he's a good fella. Give him a half a cup of coffee with a carafe of hot water. He really only drinks brown water."

"You got it, Boss."

Joe stood a little taller after she said that. The cafe was hopping now and Pearl and Susan were going to make a good team. He might even have time to talk to his customers for a chance. Maybe he would even buy himself a stool to put behind the cash register so he could relax and watch. His legs had been bothering him more anyway.

Soon the sun was up and so many people came to the restaurant that all three of them were working hard. This pleased Joe because it seemed that his business was picking up. He might even have to hire another waitress if it stayed this busy. He was mighty glad Pearl had brought Susan in. She was good with the customers. He still wasn't going to trust her with the cash register. She sure was a pretty girl. He cleaned off the table for some new customers. Susan took their order. The restaurant didn't quit buzzing. Word must have gotten out that Pearl was cooking.

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Maddie was finishing an article in the Business Journal when she heard crying in the guest room. She moved swiftly to the door and then slowed down to avoid startling Rachel. "Mommy." cried Rachel.

"Hi Rachel, remember me?" Maddie stayed at the door peeking in "Your mommy is at work. Can I come in?" Rachel nodded her head no and then pulled the covers over her head. Susan had moved the bed into a corner so that the room seemed bigger. Rachel was snuggled into the corner of the bed.

"Do you remember me Rachel?" There was movement under the quilt, barely discernible. "I can't see you under that quilt. Where are you?" Maddie used her best children's voice to sound like a playmate.

"Hmmm. I wonder, where's Rachel?" Rachel giggled at this.

"Goodness, I'm going to have to go find Rachel. I wonder where she went."

Rachel pulled the covers down and she was grinning. "There she is," laughed Maddie while still standing in the doorway. Rachel covered her head again with the quilt. "Rachel is gone again. I wonder where she went." As Maddie said this, she stepped into the room. Rachel quickly pulled the covers down again and Maddie was closer but Rachel still giggled. They played this game a few more times until Maddie was kneeling beside the bed playing with the child. When Maddie began to

tire of the game she said, "How about some breakfast?" Rachel nodded her head, crawled from under the covers and stuck her thumb in her mouth. Sitting on the edge of the bed, she reached her free arm up as a signal for Maddie to pick her up.

Maddie jiggled Rachel and made faces at her as she walked to the kitchen. She then put her in the chair at the table, poured Cheerios into a bowl and asked if Rachel wanted milk. Rachel nodded her head so Maddie poured milk on the Cheerios. Rachel looked confused so Maddie gave her a spoon. Rachel watched Maddie closely as she ate her cheerios. Maddie decided to grab a magazine to read. Before she got back to the table, Rachel had knocked her bowl over and sat with a frightened look on her face. "Don't worry Rachel," Maddie said as calm as possible while she hurried to clean up the mess. The table was too high for Rachel. She needed a booster. She cleaned up the mess, got Rachel another bowl of cereal but not filled so full this time. She sat down to watch Rachel and wondered how to talk to a child. What was she going to do while the child was awake all day? Maddie began

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to dread the day. She had overlooked something important before. She loved children, but she did not want to be around them all day.

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By the end of the day, Susan was exhausted but seventy-five dollars richer. Pearl was pleased that things had worked out well. Joe was so pleased he complimented both Pearl and Susan as they closed and even said "See ya in the morning." He usually just said goodnight so Pearl thought this was his way of saying he liked Susan. At least she hoped that was it. The girl did do a good job and they all kept busy. The two women stopped by Ted's grocery store so that Susan could pick up the things she needed. Before getting out of the truck, Susan offered half of her money to Pearl.

"Young'un, don't worry about that right now. Saturday is busy too and once we get you set up with what you need, it will all work out. I've been saving for a rainy day and if you're paying your way, it won't even dip into that."

Susan loved the quaintness of the small grocery but was surprised at all the things the store didn't carry. She wondered if there was a bigger town nearby. Not that she could get to it since she didn't have a car. Then she realized she could call the police and report her car was stolen. She should have done it right away. At the time, she wanted to get away from Rod so badly, she didn't think of the consequences. She could get her own car back. It was an old Saab but it was better than

nothing. This thought cheered her and she quickly finished her shopping. Pearl was at the front talking to a talk skinny man when Susan rolled her cart to the register.

"Susan, this is Ted. He's the owner of this store and the Quik Check down the street."

"Nice to meet you." They exchanged.

Pearl had been talking to Ted to reassure him that everything was okay at her house. The rumor mill had gotten word around the entire town about Pearl's house guests. She guessed Joe might have started it. She hoped that now one of the townsfolk would start the good news that Susan was a responsible young woman. Maybe then, the town would rally round and help them all. Wouldn't it be nice if someone offered her an apartment free until she could get on her feet? At that

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thought, a little sadness crept into Pearl's heart. Her mama and deddy had always said she was too tenderhearted. She couldn't kill the chickens for supper because they were her friends. She didn't eat beef or ham for a long time because she knew the animals. She finally quit helping her deddy with the animals because there's only so long you can avoid eating them or the slaughter of them on the farm. Deddy

hired Maddie to help with the animals once she was big enough.

"Ready?"

"Sure. See you later, Ted."

When they got home, Maddie was asleep on the couch with Rachel cuddled up under her arm. Pearl and Susan both smiled and tried to be quiet but the rustling of the bags woke Maddie up. Rachel was zonked out. Susan gently picked Rachel up and took her back to the bedroom to continue the nap. While they were in the bedroom, Pearl and Maddie caught up on the day while Pearl unpacked the groceries.

Quietly Susan came back to help unpack and learn where Pearl stored things.

"More good news, ladies." Maddie announced. "St. John's has offered to help Susan out for the first month with daycare. They will allow Rachel to stay for the first month at no charge. Susan, I thought if I told them your story, at least what I know of it, they would be more likely to help you. After January, you'll have to pay them a fee based upon your income. They said they could work that out with you later. The head of the daycare will need to see what the bottom line is. The only problem is that they don't open until six in the morning. Now I love you Pearl but I can't do this every day. If I don't make pots, I don't make a living."



"I know that." Pearl was pensive for a moment and Susan got nervous. "You know, Susan did so good today that I'm sure that we can convince Joe to let her come in after dropping Rachel off. Tomorrow, you work as hard as you did today and then we can convince him afterward."

"You think?"

"This will help everyone in the long run. I overheard Joe on the phone with one of his old waitresses. He asked her if she might be willing to come in next weekend since we were so busy today.

Tomorrow will be the same or worse."

"You don't think he was trying to get rid of me by calling the old waitress?" Rachel was worried.

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"No, Besides, once I start putting my special recipes on the menu more of the locals will come and then they will invite their friends."

"Isn't that too much change at once for Joe?" asked Maddie.

"No, I think Joe is tired of cooking and his legs have started to bother him. The new menus are supposed to come in the first week of January."

"I have to admit this is exciting." Maddie then offered to treat them

to dinner but both declined. Everyone then went their separate ways to chill out from a long day of change.

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## 23 TOWN NEWS

Pleasant Quarry was a picturesque town. On the horizon, the tips of the trees began to redden against the winterscape of clouds and other shades of gray. The air was heavy with cold. Drivers on the streets of the little town were slow and careful though no precipitation had yet touched the ground. Winter had set in like a hound on the porch.

Weeks passed and by the end of January, Susan had become a hit at Joe's Place, but not as much as Pearl for her cooking. Susan was easy on the eyes, but Pearl worked up your appetite. The holidays were over, but the business continued to pick up so much that an older waitress, Polly, had to start coming in every day. Joe bought a stool to keep near the cash register. His left leg began to hurt worse and since the three women were doing good work, he was okay to let them. He had worked his derriere off in the business for thirty years. It was the first time in those thirty years that he had dependable help. He hoped they were also loyal. He knew that Polly and Pearl were trustworthy and

thought Susan might be, but trust had to be earned. He never trusted blindly.

Rachel had a few hard mornings at the daycare because she had never been around other children. Once she discovered that playing with other children was fun, she sometimes didn't want to leave in the afternoons. She was always glad to see her mama and Pearl though. Often the two adults would play with her on the swing set if they weren't too tired. The evenings were full of the beautiful ordinary tasks of cleaning, cooking, and resting. Maddie was a regular visitor to watch a movie or share a meal. They all became close knit and watched out for each other. Rachel was the happiest she had been. Because of that, Susan was happy too.

Leah had moved in to her apartment across from the Post Office after Mrs. Berringer gave her permission to paint. Since Kat was nice to Leah and seemed interested in her, she asked if Kat would help paint the apartment. While they painted, they talked about rocks and Leah's dad's architectural firm. Kat seemed really interested in his work. She

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didn't seem the type to be interested in architecture. After painting the apartment, they called out for pizza. Relaxed in the lawn chairs that

Leah brought inside, they were more focused on each other than painting. Some cold beer helped them relax even more. The heat grew between the two and at one point, became so flammable that neither knew what to say. Leah could sense Kat trying to decide whether she should make a move. Leah was glad she had not moved the bed in yet. Of course, that had not stopped her when she was in her twenties, but she had to have decorum since she was a professor. Besides, all she knew about Kat was that they had chemistry and she liked rocks. As dusk fell, Leah didn't have to worry about what was going to happen because Kat suddenly said she had to go. It was for the best really. Leah did not know what her colleagues would think if she began to date one of the maintenance crew. Why was it so hard to find a good woman with a good education? She guessed it didn't matter. Why was it so hard to find a good woman?

Beau asked Anna to go out to eat at Blue Bay, a seafood restaurant, a couple of Friday nights during January. She was nice and easy to be with, but he still wasn't sure about her. Was he afraid? She had suggested a movie one night and when he said he wasn't interested, she seemed disappointed. He soon realized that while Anna was nice and kind, he missed his wife still. He missed the arguments and perhaps even missed her nagging him. She always knew he didn't want to go to

movies after he had worked hard at the barbershop. Maybe he would just be an old crotchety bachelor for the rest of his life. He didn't want to hurt Anna's feelings and he didn't want to be hurt. Besides, his wife had moved to the beach.

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On the last day of January Maddie woke up thinking about her old friend Lynn. Lynn was five months older than she was and they pretty much grew up together until the Thompson family moved to Texas. Maddie had missed her birthday again. January thirtieth was Lynn's birthday and Maddie usually thought of her even though she had lost touch with her. When they were younger, they would play softball, ride bikes, and go fishing in the creek. Lynn taught Maddie how to play softball and tennis because Maddie's parents were not very athletic,

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though her mom had played softball at one time. Lynn's deddy, Ned, gave Maddie the first ball glove she ever used. It was one of his older ones and was perfect for fifth grade hands. Lynn and Maddie often pretended that they were major league ball players, each taking turns at being a favorite pitcher. Maddie loved Rollie Fingers, Vida Blue, and Catfish Hunter of the Oakland A's. She couldn't remember Lynn's

favorite pitchers even though she was more into sports than Maddie. She hoped Lynn was happy and sent her a silent birthday song as she got up for the day.

The early morning seemed extra cold at five o'clock so Maddie decided to start a fire to make it toasty inside the house. There was something soothing about a fire on a cold morning and besides, she felt contemplative. When she went out to get the wood a dry sleet had started to fall. She grabbed some kindling and some oak splits to get the fire going, raced to pull her work clothes on to feed Lightning and make sure his water had not frozen even though she had put the water bucket heater in the trough. Lightning was happy to see Maddie and they did the morning nuzzle before Maddie fed him. Maddie had forgotten about the sleet until it started sleeting harder on the barn's tin roof. She hurried along and told Lightning she would return. He whinnied as she closed the barn door.

The temperature had dropped to thirty degrees in the short time she was in the barn so she turned on the news to see what the weatherman predicted. Even if the morning was rough, more than likely it would all be melted by noon. That's about how long the snow and ice lasted in the Carolinas in recent years. She poked at the fire a bit and heard the report that no one should be on the road this

morning since the roads were iced. She turned off the television to call Pearl. She knew Pearl would be busy getting ready for work and never watched television in the morning.

“Pearl?”

“Who else?”

“Glad I caught you. Better not go out right now. The roads are iced.”

“Yeah, Joe just called and said he slid into the parking lot this morning. Told us to wait until he called. Makes us all a little antsy.”

“You might want to watch the news to see if Rachel’s day care has closed too. They should list that on WBTV.”

“Good idea. Are you and Lightning okay? Have all you need?”

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“Yep. Had just bought groceries and stacked a fourth rick of wood last week.”

“Four ricks?” Pearl laughed aloud “That will last you through four winters.”

“Well I like fires. They’re romantic.”

“Now you just need the romance,” Pearl jested. When she heard the silence on the other end of the line she asked “Did I hurt your

feelings? I was just playing with you.”

“I had hoped that this woman I met might be a romance. Just a dream I guess.”

“Someone wonderful will come along and snatch you up. Don’t give up.”

“Pearl, let’s pray that if someone snatches me up again, that they will be stable in the mind and have a stable job! I wouldn’t even care if she worked at a stable as long as she is consistently employed!”

“It’ll happen.”

“I hope so. Talk to you later.”

By the time Maddie had gotten off the phone, the fire was burning steadily. She was glad that she could see the fireplace from the kitchen and went to make breakfast. As she washed her hands in the kitchen sink, she saw huge fluffy flakes falling through the dark of morning. After a breakfast of country ham and scrambled eggs, Maddie sat down in her grandmother’s old Mission Rocker that was beside the fireplace. She took off her boots and placed them beside the rocker. A clump of mud and straw fell on the oak floor. “Dang it,” she said to herself. She took the boots to the mat at the back door and realized she needed to rethink this. She didn’t want to strew barn messes all over her new house. She opened the door to put the boots on the back



porch but the cold was so biting she thought she might need to keep them inside for now. She looked at the thermometer on the porch post and the temperature had dropped three more degrees to twenty-seven. It was a day to stay at home and think. She went back to her rocker, pulled up the footrest and began to sip on her coffee as she listened to the fire pop in the early morn.

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Pearl had turned on the television as soon as she got off the phone with Maddie. If the daycare was closed, then Susan would have to stay home with Rachel. She seemed to be getting along with Joe great so she knew she shouldn't worry but it would be the first test of job loyalty.

"Pearl, why don't you let me fix breakfast for you for a change?"

Susan offered.

"That would be nice. Are you sure you don't mind?"

"I would be honored." Susan handed a cup of apple juice to Rachel who was dressed for daycare but obviously still sleepy. She walked over to Pearl and climbed in her lap.

"St. John's will be closed today so no daycare for Rachel." Pearl

tousled the wayward curls on the sleepy girl. Looking down at Rachel, she saw that her eyelids were heavy. “Do you want to go back to bed?”

Rachel shook her head to say no while she held onto her cup like a doll. “Where’s your dolly, Rachel?” At the question, the little girl perked up, handed her cup to Pearl and ran back to her bed to get her baby. Both Pearl and Susan laughed at the change of energy. “Do you need me to do anything?”

“No. I’m good. Do you want pancakes?”

“That sounds good. I’ve not had them in a long time and few people order them at Joe’s.”

Pearl saw the snow out the window of the den. She looked to see if the snow was sticking. Rachel came bursting down the hallway with her baby and grabbed Pearl’s legs with one arm while lifting the baby with the other. Pearl picked her up with a swoop and in excited joy she said, “Look Rachel, it’s snowing.” For a few minutes, the two of them were mesmerized by the falling snow until Rachel wanted down. As Pearl went to sit at the kitchen bar, the phone rang.

“Pearl, this is Joe.”

“You alright?”

“I’m fine. I’ve just decided to close the restaurant today. It’s never busy on Tuesday anyway and it won’t hurt to be closed for this one

day.”

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yes, I’m sure.” Joe sounded annoyed that Pearl asked that a second time. “I’m going to go home and sit by my fire and rest with my old dog.” He chuckled a bit as he thought about the town’s

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reaction. “Plus, it will give everyone something to talk about for a while. It’s been too humdrum around here for weeks.”

“If it warms up I can go in at noon.”

“I said not to worry about it and I mean it. God, you can be a stubborn woman.”

“You’re one to talk.”

“Bye.” Joe hung up in a huff.

“Bye to you too,” Pearl said as she looked at the phone while hanging up. “Susan, looks like we’ve got a day off from work.”

“Is Joe okay?”

“He says he is but that’s not like the penny-pinching workaholic I know. Guess I’ll go put on some comfy clothes.”

After the three had eaten breakfast, Pearl had some time alone while Susan gave Rachel a bath. She had never seen maple syrup go so far so

fast, as when Rachel began to eat. It was clear the child loved pancakes. She got it all over the table, over her clothes and in her hair. Susan was probably going to have to take another shower too. Pearl looked at the mess in the kitchen finding it hard to resist cleaning it up but Susan insisted that she wanted to clean it up since Rachel made such a mess. Pearl was glad that Susan was as much of a neat freak as she was, probably more so. She poured another cup of coffee and claimed her favorite book as she sat down in her dad's old recliner. She hated recliners and the way they looked. They were big, bulky pieces of men's furniture but she couldn't get rid of her deddy's chair. It wasn't exactly the right color of blue for her trailer's colors either but she didn't have the money to reupholster it though her Uncle Jimmy had offered to do it at half the price. Half of Jimmy's price was still too high for Pearl. She reckoned it was a good thing she had kept it; quite providential some would say since it rocked and Susan used it with Rachel sometimes to get her to sleep. Pearl was enjoying the silence of the living room with faint giggles coming from the other room. Pearl put her book down on the small table beside the recliner and sipped her coffee as she watched the snow kiss the ground. How long had it been since she thought of kisses? She didn't know. Melancholy tried to sneak into her heart for a moment,

then she heard Susan singing some lullaby to Rachel and tears welled up in her eyes. She took a deep breath and the tears went away as she picked her book back up and started to read.

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Beau had gone over to his mama and deddy's house as soon as he saw the sleet. He took some clothes to change into since he knew he wouldn't be able to get down the hill at his deddy's once he got to the house. The old man had the wood stove fired up so hot Beau had to take off his red flannel shirt when he got inside. The kitchen smelled good because his mama had just made her wonderful homemade biscuits. He was glad that his brother Cletus had given them some homemade molasses. There was nothing better than molasses and homemade biscuits. His mom had just finished cooking the bacon when he walked in so she added a few more pieces for Beau and asked him to stir up the eggs and set out the milk.

Beau wondered how his deddy had been able to get away with never helping the women folk. He knew it was a different time but still.... his mama had been losing weight and slowing down; looks like he could have helped her sometimes. It just wasn't his deddy's way. He

could see him sitting in his Naugahyde recliner. He still had his coat on over his overalls. Must have forgotten to take it off after he fed the chickens. Beau remembered he needed to check on his cows.

“Mama, I need to go check on the cows.”

“Yore deddy got ‘em up last naight.”

“Deddy, did you get them cows up in the barn?”

“’ep.”

“Did you feed ‘em this morning?”

“’ep.”

Beau started to fuss at his dad because he would have been able to stay at home had he known. His blood pressure must have gone up because he felt his face turn red from the anger. His mama touched him gently on the shoulder,

“Won’t hurt ya to stay with us. There’s some ‘simmern pudding in the freezer on the porch. We kin git that out fer lunch.”

“Okay mama.” He kissed her on the cheek and went to look for the pudding. There was nothing better than his mother’s persimmon pudding.

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Leah was glad she had no classes on Tuesdays because she woke up later than usual. She smelled something cooking in the kitchen and wondered what she had done. It had been too long and last night she gave in to Kat. As she lay in the bed, she savored the feel of the sheets against her bare skin. She could feel her body wanting more, but since Kat had prepared breakfast, she figured the least she could do is show up at the table. She grabbed her silk robe and hustled to the kitchen. The bedroom was the coldest place in the apartment since the old house had no insulation. Perhaps she could coax Kat into another round of sex after they had eaten.

In the living room area, Kat had turned up the heater and the heat from the stove had made the area even warmer.

“Good morning, sexy.” Kat’s blue eyes sparkled and the outline of her nose looked like a witch...no, a hag. The witches Leah knew were gorgeous.

Leah shook her head to get that thought out of her mind. Where did that thought come from, she wondered? That was not what she wanted to think and it did nothing for her libido. The thought left her with an uneasy feeling deep in her soul.

“Good morning. How are you this morning?”

“Delicious.” She leaned down and gave Leah a quick kiss. “Did you

hear the sleet?”

“No. I was zonked out.” Leah pressed her body against Kat’s back.

“I couldn’t sleep because I was so excited. Now it’s snowing. Looks like you might be stuck with me today.” She turned around and kissed Leah on the forehead quickly “Let’s eat.”

“Okay.” Leah was disappointed. Things had started out awkwardly last night, but then things happened. They made love. She thought Kat would be more relaxed this morning and the morning could be sensuous as they lingered in bed.

“Aren’t you gonna come eat?” The image of a sexy morning was further demolished as Kat said “Let’s go sledding. We can use your baking pans.”

Leah was not at all interested in sledding on a sled much less using her good baking pans. She wondered how to get out of being out in the snow. She had not liked playing in the snow when she was a child, why should she start now. Snow was a free day to read and drink hot chocolate...or make love all day. After they finished breakfast, Kat

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picked up the plates to wash them. Leah slipped off her silk robe and reached her arms around to touch Kat. When Kat turned around, Leah



made sure that she understood that the only kind of playing to happen on that day would be in her bed.

By noon, Leah felt she was finally sated. She stretched awake and reached for Kat. She could hear her talking on the phone in the living room. She grabbed her robe and quietly moseyed into the living room. As she opened the door to the area, she heard Kat say “Honey, I got caught at a friend’s house because of the snow and I’ll be there as soon as it melts.” Leah’s jaw dropped but Kat couldn’t see her because her back was to Leah. It was clear she was trying to talk quietly enough that she wouldn’t awaken Leah. Leah crossed her arms across her chest and stood still to listen.

“I know you miss me but I’ll be home later. You have fun in the snow.” Then Kat hung up, turned around, and saw Leah’s expression and said “I can explain. Can we talk?”

“How dare you!” Leah was furious. “Why didn’t you tell me you were with someone?”

“I’m not! That was my daughter. I didn’t tell you because some women don’t want to be around children.”

“Children?”

“Yes. That was my daughter.”

“You have a daughter? When I talked to you about my ex-husband

you could have shared this important tidbit.” Leah was still furious and she couldn’t remember Kat ever alluding to the fact that she had a child or that she even liked children in general. “How old is this daughter?”

“She’s twelve.”

“Twelve? You have a twelve-year-old and didn’t bother to tell me?”

Leah was boiling mad. “Also, who is the twelve-year-old staying with? Certainly, you didn’t leave her alone. I hate liars! Get out.”

“I can’t. The roads are icy.”

“I don’t care. Get out. I won’t stand for a liar!”

“Listen. I know you’re mad, but you don’t want me to wreck, do you? Then there would be a child without a mother.” Kat spoke assuredly as though she knew Leah were under her control.

Leah didn’t want her to wreck and she knew it was dangerous outside. For once, the snow and ice had not melted by noon. Great. She finally had the guts to say, “Get out” to a liar and then there was

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no way for her to leave. “Fine. Then you can stay in here and I will stay in the bedroom.”

“But it’s cold in the bedroom and I thought that after last night and this morning...” Kat came over to touch her and try to be sexy.

“Now you want to be close? First, you get me up to go sledding.

Now I find out that you’re already lying to me. I don’t think so. Don’t touch me.” Leah went into the bedroom and slammed the door.

“Dammit!” She yelled. Then she remembered the meek librarian upstairs. She probably scared her to death. She didn’t really care right now. She wanted to be alone and she was stuck with Kat for today.

“Dammit,” she said under her breath this time. Tears started to come up but she forced them back and for once, she was successful. It was cold in the bedroom and that helped. She put on her jeans and cashmere sweater. Then she realized she should also put on a shirt and bra. She didn’t want to go back into the living room looking sexy. Hell, she didn’t want to go back into the living room at all. Let the woman suffer. She heard the door open and yelled “Stay out, damn it!”

“I’m staying out, just wanted to let some heat in for you.”

Leah could tell that Kat was standing at the door waiting for her to be forgiving or something. “Go away.”

“Okay. I’ll just sit in here and watch a little television.”

“Good luck with that,” Leah thought to herself, because her television didn’t work really. She only had it for movies and there was no video set up yet. There would be little she could watch. She could sit in there and stare at the walls if she wanted to. Leah heard the

television come on, the click of the channels, the noise of no channels and then the click to turn it off. Then she heard Kat begin to clean the dishes. At least she can clean up after herself. A kid. Leah couldn't believe that Kat neglected to share that important detail. Leah wondered about the child. What had Kat said about being gone from home? She grabbed the book on her nightstand and put on her glasses. She flipped on the Tiffany lamp and sat back in her leather chair to read.

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The snowy day was relaxing for Susan and Pearl and the first time all three had been in the trailer at the same time. Before then, Susan and Rachel kept to themselves on Sunday by sleeping in or going to the mall. Joe had altered the work schedule so that some of the time, if one had the day off, the other was working. This was worked out by Joe so that the ladies could have some time alone at home. Pearl began to wonder if she had misjudged Joe, that perhaps he was a thoughtful, kind person. Sure, he had balked at the thought of her taking Susan home but he could have stopped her. Even though she knew that something had happened between Joe and her father, she didn't know

the details; only that it involved a deal of money. The thought led her back to her mother and deddy. She remembered the last time she saw them and was sad, but then the sadness led to the joyful memories.

Pearl came out of her reverie when Susan pulled the stopper out of the kitchen sink. They both listened to the water swirl down the drain for a moment and then Pearl spoke,

“If you want, I can go back to my bedroom so you can watch television.”

“Do you mind if we visit for a little bit?” Susan walked into the living room, sat on the couch, and pulled her bare feet up under her.

“Are you cold?”

“Not really. My feet are tough and I tend to be hot natured. Pearl, how long have you lived here?”

“All my life.”

“No, I mean in the trailer park?”

“A coupla years. I lived with my mother and deddy up until then.”

“Are they still living?”

Pearl’s heart ached still; she knew it always would but tragedy makes the edges of grief more pointed.

“No, they were killed in a car accident. Both gone at once.”

“I’m sorry to bring up such a memory.”

“Actually, I was already thinking about them. I guess it’s been a while since I had a day off too. I try to keep myself busy so I won’t think about it too much. How about you? Where are you from originally?”

“I was born and raised in Charlotte. My family still lives there but they won’t have anything to do with me.”

“Why? You’re such a sweet girl.”

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“You know the story. Sweet girl gets involved with bad boy, and then gets pregnant. We were even using birth control, but I still got pregnant. Rachel’s dad thought I was lying to him since he knew he had used a condom. I told him they were not one hundred percent foolproof.” Susan saw that Pearl’s face had turned rose red at the mention of a condom. “Sorry. I was too frank, wasn’t I? Our family always talked openly about sex. Our parents hoped that by being open minded neither of us daughters would get pregnant.

“I actually loved Rachel’s father and would have married him, but he didn’t believe that the child was his and left us. My aunt paid for an apartment for me until Rachel was about two and a half, but then my aunt died. Then I got involved with Rod because we needed a place to

live and he was sexy.” Susan paused here and Pearl remained quiet, listening, and compassionate. “Pearl, you probably saved my life and maybe Rachel’s. He had threatened to hurt her and that’s when I decided that I had to leave. Then he took my car and my money. The day you helped us was the day I was going to try and walk to my parents’ house and beg them to have mercy on us.”

“What a shame. They don’t sound like very nice people.”

“They can be but they can also be judgmental. They would have nothing to do with my sister for a while because she came out to them as a lesbian, but I thought I would get a break since I was straight. Nope. My mom is an equal opportunity oppressor. Dad would have given in once he saw Rachel, but mom got in the way of them ever meeting.”

“Are you sure your mom wouldn’t have given in too?” Pearl wondered if there was more to the story. By now, she trusted Susan and she loved Rachel.

“I had written her about six months ago. She told me she had a harsh mother and she was a harsh mother. If I planned on being with hoodlums, then I was never welcome at her house.”

“But you were leaving the hoodlum, right?”

“Yes, but I can’t promise I won’t get involved with another. I’ve

been told I have a thing for bad boys. Besides that, Rachel is the perfect likeness to her deddy and my mother knows his family. She went on and on about how I humiliated the entire family.”

Pearl reached out and patted Susan’s arm. “You can just stay with me until you can get back on your feet. You hear?”

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“Thanks. I hope one day I can repay you for your kindness.”

“Seeing you two girls happy and on your own will be the greatest reward.”

Pearl had an impulse to hug Susan and that felt odd. She really wasn’t much of a hugger. She learned to accept and give hugs to Rachel, but she was a child. Pearl decided to go take a nap. There was too much emotion; the honesty was wearing her down. Before she could get up from her chair, Susan asked,

“Have you ever been married?”

Pearl froze for a moment and her heart almost cracked wide open, almost remembered. She then replied “That’s a story for another day, Deary. I’m going to go take a nap.” As Pearl made her way back to her bedroom, she promised herself she would make sure to avoid quality time alone with Susan. While she liked the woman, she felt so



comfortable she wanted to tell her everything and that must never happen.

§

The hours passed slowly. Leah was expecting the earth to be moved by James Joyce's writing and instead, she was disappointed. All the day brought was disappointment. At least Kat hadn't bothered her. She hadn't left yet either. The roads were still a bit dangerous. Still, Leah wanted to get away from all that happened. She grabbed her keys and her coat, opened the door to the living room.

"I'm going to the library by myself. I need some fresh air." Kat tried to say something but Leah ignored her.

It's not as if she had never been lied to before. She had, but she had thought she had improved at recognizing a liar. She walked to the gas station and then crossed the road at the light. The Pharmacy was closed and she bet the library would be closed too. Dammit to hell, what an awful day. Still, she stomped on to the library. If nothing else, perhaps she could walk some of the anger off. She couldn't believe she had not recognized the signs of a liar. While walking, she realized she was more afraid than angry. She was tired of bad relationships and clearly could not find a healthy partner if her life depended on it.

She passed the What-A-Burger and it was open, but with only a few

customers. She wished she had brought her wallet because now she was hungry. She was pleased to see the library was open. As soon as

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she walked in, she realized that her library card was also in her wallet. She didn't curse aloud but she thought it. At least she could read the Charlotte Observer before she went back home. Her subscription had not started yet at the new apartment.

An hour later, Rick tapped on the table where she was working the crossword puzzle.

"Sorry to bother you but we're closing early. Hoping the road won't refreeze before everyone gets home."

"No problem. I was surprised you were open."

"I only live a couple of blocks away so I can walk. Nancy risked the drive but she needs to get home before it freezes. Since she's the boss, she gave me permission to close early and I'm taking that opportunity."

He smiled at the thought. "Your name is Lisa, right? I met you the other week."

"No, it's Leah and I remember you too, Rick. You were so nice to me, I decided to move here." They both laughed at that.

"Leah, I can't promise I will remember your name. I never forget a

face but sometimes I mix up names. If you wait a few minutes while I close up, I can walk you home if you are living in that apartment of Mrs. Berringer's."

"Thanks. Maybe I'll take you up on a walk another time. I've got something on my mind."

"You can't blame a girl for trying," said Rick as he winked at her.

Leah looked surprised and looked around the library to see who all was still there.

"Don't worry. Nancy knows. Mr. Belcher is the only one still here and he's totally deaf. His daughter went to get her car to pick him up. Ta-ta for now."

"See ya."

As she walked out of the library, Leah had to admit that Rick cheered her a bit with his banter. She was cheered even more when she arrived at her apartment and Kat's truck was gone. She pumped her arm in a victory "Yes!" and went to unlock the door. She started to complain about her unlocked door when she saw Mrs. Berringer sitting in the complex's parlor.

"Hello Miss Tomas. Since I was driving by I thought I would stop by and see if you are all settled in."

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“Yes ma’am, I am.” Leah responded but did not offer for her to come into her apartment. She had not made the bed because she was so mad when she left, and the front door opened first into the bedroom. She might have to buy a twin bed and put it in the back room. She certainly wasn’t going to have any more women to her house.

“Miss Belk, are you ignoring me?”

“Sorry, I had something on my mind. I’m all settled in, so thanks for coming by.”

“Can I see how you painted?”

Leah hesitated but it was better to show her than for her to take the privilege of walking into her apartment when she wasn’t there.

“Excuse the mess. It’s been a trying day.”

“Blue?”

“Not really. I’m more mad.”

“I am talking about the paint. I thought you were going to paint the apartment white but the bedroom is gray and the living area is blue. I would never have guessed you would paint a room blue.”

“I asked if I could paint it any color I wanted and you said yes.”

“But I thought you would paint it white.”

Leah couldn't take any more of this day. She tried to appease Mrs. Berringer and get her out of her apartment as fast as possible. She finally got her outside the apartment door. Mrs. Berringer was huffy and indignant,

"Don't forget your rent is due tomorrow. Everyone tells me I can't take it with me, but I tell them I'm going to pack a U-Haul and bury it with me when I'm gone."

"I can give you the check now."

"Fine. Bring it to my car. I need to warm it up before I drive back home."

Leah made out her check and took it to the old biddy in the beige Cadillac. What had she gotten herself into by moving here?

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## 24 BUSY AFTER THE SNOW

The next day, people from the area swarmed the restaurant. It seemed that the folks got cabin fever after only one snow day. Joe knew that many of them missed their daily gossip since he had closed the restaurant for a day. Women often get blamed for being gossips, but Joe knew that men were gossips too. They merely gossiped at breakfast or at the barbershop. He was glad that Beau didn't contribute

to the tales even though he heard a load of trouble in his barber chair.

Joe had heard his own share of troubles through the crowd of mostly men at breakfast. Sometimes folks need a confidante.

Sometimes though, the men and women talked about important things. It was through his customers that he first heard that Pearl was devastated by her mom and dad's death. The news was quite a blow to Joe too, but he had his business and Pearl would have no income. She wasn't disabled, merely devoted to her parents. Many times, he thought her devotion to them was unhealthy and he had once told his dad that very thing. Some day he was going to have to talk to Pearl. The fact that she had found records made him uneasy as if he was lying about something when in fact, he was just not saying anything. That wasn't lying, that was keeping a secret.

The bell on the door suddenly made an awful racket and brought Joe back to the current moment. That odd man from Asheboro walked in again and upon his entrance, the bell fell from its place. It clearly embarrassed the man since everyone in the restaurant turned to see what happened. Pearl, Susan, and Polly were so busy they only looked up to see the source of the noise and then went back to work. When Joe left his stool, he felt older than Methuselah and he moved as if he was ancient too. The pain in the left leg had worsened even though he

stayed off it most of the time since the new arrangement with Pearl cooking. As he hobbled to the door, the man spoke to him in a quiet, considerate voice.

“Sorry about that.” He looked up to where the bell should hang.

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“No apology needed. It’s just an old cowbell and it didn’t harm a thing. Made sure everyone was awake, right Beau?”

“I’m glad that darn thing is gone,” Beau replied. “It drives me crazy.”

Joe laughed at Beau “You see Beau, I put it up so you men folk will eventually get up and go home.” All the men in hearing distance laughed at that. Joe picked up a napkin that had fallen off a table and as he made his way back to his stool, the cowbell clunked with every step. Someone called out “Joe you need to get moooving.” Everyone laughed at that including Joe who called back “The world doesn’t need more smart asses, Scott,” but all the while he was smiling. Joe loved his customers. By the time he got to his stool, a trucker was waiting at the cash register, ready to pay his bill.

“Hope you enjoyed your meal.” Joe said while still laughing at the jokes.

“That was the best meal I had since my grandmaw died.” The man sucked on a toothpick while he got the money out of his ratty billfold that was chained to his belt.

“Pearl’s the best cook in the county.” The cash register dinged as Joe totaled up the bill. The cash drawer plunked out and you could hear the rattle of change as Joe added cash to the drawer and counted out the difference.

“I’ll be back and I’m tellin’ my buddies to stop by too when they are on this route.”

“Thank you. What’s your name?”

“Tank.”

“Nice to meet you Tank. I’m Joe. Safe travels.”

Joe watched the big man as he moseyed to the door while putting the change in his wallet. He stopped at the table and chatted with the man from Asheboro while he put his billfold into the back of his dirty pants. He could hear Tank reply “A’ight. Later.” He then ambled out the door. Joe looked at the man from Asheboro. He was going to get his name since it looked like he was going to be a regular customer. As Joe made his way, he spoke to the customers that he passed. Susan was whirring around like a dervish. The place was noisy, but Joe was determined to get a name this time.



“Glad to see you’re back.”

“Even if I broke your door bell?”

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“Like I said, it’s no problem.” They were both smiling and there was easiness between them. “Thought I needed to get your name since you’re becoming a regular.”

“Name’s Sam and I heard you tell Tank that your name is Joe. This is a great restaurant you got here.”

“Not good enough to drive here all the way from Asheboro though.” Joe winked and knew he was being nosey. He tried not to be a nosey fellow but sometimes his curiosity got the best of him.

“No. I don’t live in Asheboro. Just make deliveries to lots of different places. I work for a Wholesale Sporting Goods company in New London and when I come your way it’s mostly to pick up some big wig at the airport or to deliver to sporting goods stores in Concord.”

“How about that? I didn’t even know New London was that big.”

Ding, ding. Someone rang the bell at the register. “Hope you’ll keep coming back and sending us customers like Tank.” Ding, ding. The woman at the register was impatient. Joe wanted to throw that bell at

her. It's not as though he was ignoring her. "Excuse me." He made his way back to the register trying to tone down his irritation. He put on his best fake smile "Sorry to keep you waiting ma'am."

"It's no problem. I just love the way these little bells sound." She dinged it again and Joe kept the fake smile on and hurried to get her out of the restaurant. After she went out the door, he took the bell and put it beneath the counter. It's not as if they needed it anymore since he was sitting at the register. The customers started to rush to leave since most had to be back to work. Ten minutes later Sam came up in the line to pay.

"Didn't mean to be rude earlier."

"Oh, you weren't. Saw that you put the bell under the counter after she left." Sam was smiling tongue in cheek.

"I had hoped no one noticed." Joe laughed. Joe began to total the bill and make the exchange of money.

"Is your cook named Pearl?"

"Yes. Do you know her?"

"From a long, long time ago." Sam looked through the window back to the kitchen. Joe turned his head and saw that Pearl wasn't where she could be seen.

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“She’s probably out in the cooler. She’ll be right back if you want to talk to her for a minute...but only a minute. The second lunch crowd will be here soon.”

“Naw. That’s okay. Give her this note from me when things slow down. I’ll be back and maybe we can talk then.”

“Will do. If you can come closer to two o’clock it would be better.”

“Sounds good. Have a good un.”

“You too,” said Joe impatiently. The line started piling up behind Sam and people were in a hurry to go back to work. Joe put the note on the base of the register so he wouldn’t forget to give it to Pearl. The first lunch crowd had not cleared out before the second started coming in hungry and ready to eat. For about ten minutes there was a line waiting for seats. Joe was either going to have to hire another waitress or get Pearl to stop that fine cooking. He laughed to himself. He liked to make money. He kept smiling and tallying up the receipts and the time flew. It felt like he had only worked one hour when the time for closing came near.

The place was still full when he locked the door at three o’clock.

Bill called out to him “You cain’t close no more Joe. I didn’t git my breakfast and almost didn’t git my dinner.”

“Now that you mention it I’m hungry. I got so busy I forgot to eat.”

Joe yelled back towards the kitchen because those remaining were all regular customers who wouldn’t mind “Pearl, what ya got left in the kitchen?”

“There’s some boiled cabbage, green beans, and I can fry you up some chicken livers. You want them?”

“Sure do.”

“Good. Sit down and I’ll bring ‘em out. I’m tired of looking at them today.”

A few minutes later, Joe had a plate full of good food brought to him.

There were few people lingering, but they were considerate not to leave until Joe was finished. Then he went to total up the remaining customers. “Thanks for waiting for me to eat.”

“You look a little pale Joe,” Mrs. Ritchie said.

“Aw I’m all right. Just not accustomed to skipping lunch. The keys are in the door so you can get out. Will you leave that door unlocked to save me a trip?” He raised his voice to those remaining in the café and said, “It’s time for you yokels to go home now.” Everyone laughed. Who liked to work late anyway?

After the last customer left, Joe locked the door and turned the sign on the door from Open to Closed. He felt more tired than usual, but he knew he had talked to more people than ever before. He realized one advantage to being in the kitchen was he could hide out in there when he got tired. At the same time, he enjoyed chatting with his customers more and he felt they liked the attention. Maybe he needed more rest. He would just go to bed earlier. As he walked past Susan, who was cleaning off a table, he patted her on the back as she stood up straight. “You’re doing a great job.”

“Thanks Joe.”

He went to work counting the money in the drawer while the waitresses cleaned up the dining area and Pearl cleaned up the kitchen. He could feel his energy coming back a little in the quiet.

Joe completed a phone call to U.S. Foods for restock just before the waitresses got ready to leave. As he hung up he called “Pearl. I almost forgot. One of our new customers left you a note. Said he knows you.” He picked up the note written on an old receipt folded over. Pearl was clearly as tired as Joe was.

“What does it say?” Pearl had her hand on the door, walking out. She paused to hear Joe’s response.

“Hell, I don’t know. Like I had time to read it. Even if I had time I

wouldn't have read it." He was annoyed with her a little bit. He tossed the note on the counter and saw that she was annoyed with him for not reading it. He didn't care and knew that they were both too tired. She picked up the note shaking her head. She opened it and started to read it as she walked back towards the door...then she stopped dead still.

"What is it Pearl?" Pearl didn't answer so Joe spoke again "Pearl?"

"Um. Nothing. Thanks Joe." Pearl stammered a bit and looked a little wobbly. She could feel Joe's eyes on her back. "I'm okay Joe, just tired. See you in the morning." She didn't turn around to look at him, just waved her hand in the air as a sign of goodbye. Before she could get to the door, Susan walked back in to see what was taking so long. When she saw Pearl's face, she wondered if she was sick. Then Pearl made a stern face and shook her head to indicate that Susan should not say a word. She didn't and neither of them spoke all the way home.

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Maddie was pleased with the pots that came out of her salt kiln.

The pot she made on Christmas Day was sexy. She doubted she could call it a virginal pot because even though virgins can be sexy and

spiritual, she didn't think she could take the puns that would be made from titling the piece with the word virgin. The shape and colors she had chosen begged to be touched. The Feminine Divine, that's what she would call it. The more she caressed the pot the more she felt that the work of art was special in its sensuality. She set it on her studio table a little embarrassed. "Gosh what have I come to these days, getting turned on by a piece of my own pottery?" Then the phone rang. "Maddie! It's Shannon Card!"

"Shannon! How great to hear from you! What are you up to these days?"

"Working and keeping up my photography. The art gallery here is having one show a month for alumni who are artists. I'm going to display my photographs one month and as I talked to Dr. Steinmetz, he asked if I would call you since you were one of my classmates. I hear that you're one of the best potters in the Southeast!"

"Thanks, I've worked hard and hope I'm getting better. Do you have Steinmetz's number handy?"

"Sure do."

Shannon gave her the phone number and then Maddie and Shannon spent time catching up on each other's lives. Shannon had been a senior when Maddie started college and they had several art

classes together. The phone call didn't last long since neither of them liked to talk on the phone. Maddie made the call to Steinmetz and they agreed that her exhibit would start on Valentine's Day. Shannon had already shown him the pieces she had collected of Maddie's as well as shared her photographs of several exhibits. Shannon was a crackerjack photographer.

After she hung up the phone, she looked at her current stock of pots and didn't know what to think about having to open a show on Valentine's Day. Her past partners had been with her at all showings. This was her first Valentine's Day opening and she was single. Being alone and with no love interest in sight brought her down. "It sucks. That's what," She spoke aloud and her words seemed to echo through the house. "I need another dog," she thought and resolved to go to see about adopting one in the morning. At least a dog wouldn't take

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advantage of her and then she would have the unconditional love she craved.

She reviewed her promotional material and realized she needed to get some things to the printer to get ready for the show. She also needed to get a new computer. The ex-who-shall-not-be-named had



taken her Mac when Maddie kicked her out. Her attorney had encouraged Maddie to sue her, but Maddie knew that would require them to interact. All she wanted was to be free from the burden of the bitch. Maddie didn't curse much, but that woman was sheer hell. Grabbing her Canon, she took some photos of her newest pieces. Looking at the clock she saw it was too late to get the film developed and to the printer. She put the camera on her worktable and her hands on her hips. "Might as well go ride Lightning." She brightened at the thought.

§

Leah ran into Kat while running an errand on campus. She was not happy about it and could avoid her on the way to the administration building. When she returned to her building, she was deep in thought.

"Hey. How are you?" Kat spoke in a cheery voice.

"What do you think?" Leah said in her best buzz off voice.

"Didn't you get my note?"

"That's a good one."

"Really, I left a note."

"Really, I don't care. I've got to go to class." Leah hustled into the Hoffman building because she knew that Kat couldn't follow without getting in trouble. It was clear that Kat was supposed to be helping

with the crew working outside of the building. The crew kept looking at Kat from the corner of their eyes.

As the heavy doors slammed behind her, Leah wondered if there had been a note. She was so exhausted physically and emotionally after she came back from the library last night that she had not looked. She could check when she got home, but she doubted it would change her mind about anything. She didn't have time to worry about it because the Musicianship class was starting and her students would be meeting in the chapel. She was already late so she ran up the stairs to her office

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and grabbed her briefcase. She locked her office and fled out the back door to the chapel.

§

Beau was about to take his nap when the doorbell rang. He tried to ignore it because he was so tired. His mama and deddy got up at five in the morning and he was no longer used to that. When he had a wife, she always ran interference for him when he took a nap. He missed that about having a wife. The doorbell continued to ring. He got up and went to his den. Trudy, his next-door neighbor, was standing outside of his sliding glass door. He was still annoyed but it wasn't like

Trudy to ring the doorbell at this time of day. He opened the door and tried to be kind.

“Beau, have you seen Doodle?”

“Who’s Doodle?”

“My little dog. You know the one I got after Daisy and Maisy died?”

“No. I ain’t seen no dog.” Beau was annoyed that she interrupted for a dang old dog.

“I’m worried. She got out my door and I ain’t seen her for hours.”

“If I see her I’ll give you a call.”

“I wish Carol was still here. She could always catch my dogs when they got loose. Sorry to bother you. Was hoping she had come over here.”

“Hope you find her.”

“Talk to you later.” Beau started closing the door before Trudy left.

She had been neighbors with Beau for over forty years so they knew never to take offense at one another. He locked the door and went back to nap. When he lay down, he thought about how sad Trudy looked about that old dog. He guessed she was lonely. There was nothing he could do about that he thought, so he might as well rest.

He lay there a while, hoping sleep would take over. His body was tired but something nagged at him and it wasn’t his ex-wife. At the thought

of Carol, he realized he too was lonely. The recognition of the problem eased his mind and he then relaxed into sleep.

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Susan was concerned about Pearl. She could tell she was upset and didn't know what to do. She knew that Pearl didn't like to talk about her business, and that included anything about emotions or thoughts.

Susan was so busy thinking about what to do or say that she didn't realize Pearl had turned into the trailer park until they were parked.

This was not like Pearl at all.

"Pearl, can I go pick up Rachel?"

"What?" Pearl was dazed.

"Rachel is still at the daycare."

"My goodness, I forgot. How could I forget? Do you mind if I go lie down while you pick her up?"

"No, not at all. Do you need me to pick something up for you from the pharmacy?"

Pearl looked straight and hard into Susan's eyes, making Susan's soul feel bare.

"I'm fine. Just a lot on my mind. You girls get supper and I'll take

care of myself.”

“Okay.” Susan was hesitant as she spoke. “We’ll be right back and I’ll check on you.”

“No need to do that. I just need to be by myself.” Pearl was firm as she spoke. She got out of the truck slowly. As she turned back to wave, she looked old and sad to Susan. It was because she felt old and sad. Memories. Darned old memories. She trudged the rest of the way to the door, all the while feeling Susan watching her. Susan was waiting to make sure Pearl was safe in the house. While Pearl knew Susan was kind, it was the first time she wished she lived alone since the two had been there. She unlocked the door and waved for Susan to go on. After she got into the house, she went back to her bedroom and fell on her bed; lost in painful memories.

Fifteen or twenty minutes later Pearl heard Susan and Rachel return. She wondered how they had gotten back so fast. She arose and locked her bedroom door so that Rachel wouldn’t come running in to hug her. She didn’t think she could stand to be seen or touched. Since she was up, she decided to go ahead and shower. As she got into the shower, she heard Susan knock and ask if she was okay. Pearl didn’t respond and knew that Susan could hear her moving around in the bathroom through the thin walls of the trailer. Pearl wished Susan had

taken Rachel into Concord to McDonalds. She needed to be alone.

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Susan heard the shower and footsteps in Pearl's bathroom. She guessed Pearl wasn't sick, but at the same time, she had turned pale as she left the restaurant. Susan didn't know about the note. Rachel soon ran down the hall calling "Memaw," but Susan caught her before she could get to Pearl's room and pound on the door. This might be the time to watch the movie rented from the video store. Susan and Pearl had pooled their money to buy a VCR and a membership at the local video store.

"Come on honey, let's go watch a movie."

"Memaw," cried Rachel as she squirmed to get out of Susan's arms. Rachel loved Pearl so much it was unbelievable. Susan grabbed the movie on the counter, showed the front of the cover to Rachel.

"Look Rachel. It's a doggy."

"Doggy?"

"Yes, see? His name is Rusty. He takes care of his family." Susan put Rachel down to change the television channel to four...or was it three? While Susan was coordinating the television with the VCR, Rachel began to dance on her tippy toes and clap saying,

“Doggy. Doggy.”

“Yes, it’s a doggy,” Susan answered. She didn’t know where Rachel had discovered such a love of dogs since Rachel had never met a dog.

“Doggy” was one of the first words she learned after “mommy” and she still had not had the chance to learn about her own father. She

dreaded that talk. The movie started and Rachel sat down on the floor under the television screen. Susan looked back to Pearl’s room and

decided to leave her alone and trust that if Pearl needed something,

she would find a way to tell her. She looked back to Rachel who was

smiling and pointing at the television saying “Doggy.” Rachel was

happy and at peace. Susan wished that Rachel could meet her real

grandmother. She didn’t know how to explain that to Rachel either.

Susan sat down on the couch and thought about the times she had

talked to Rachel about her real grandmother. Susan always called her

mother “memaw” when talking to Rachel because she had called her

own grandmother “memaw.” When Rachel finally got to meet Mrs.

Belk, Susan would have to help her differentiate between Memaw Pearl

and Memaw Belk. At the thought of her mother, Susan realized how

tired she was. She lay down on the couch to rest her feet for a bit.

Rachel stayed entranced with Rusty the dog all through the movie.

Susan felt refreshed from the rest. She arose to make macaroni and

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green beans for Rachel. She also made cherry Jell-O with fruit cocktail in it for dessert. She continued to feel concerned for Pearl because it was not like her to avoid either of them. An hour passed before she decided she had better check on her again. She seemed like a healthy woman but she was older and Susan knew nothing about Pearl's health other than that which she could see. She knocked soft enough that Rachel wouldn't be distracted from the video.

"Pearl, do you need anything?" Susan whispered.

"I'm fine. I'm going to go to bed early." Pearl responded in a hoarse voice.

"Okay." Susan was unsure "Pearl..."

"Yes?"

"We love you."

There was no response after Susan said this so she started to walk away. She heard a sound that made her wonder if Pearl was weeping, but she couldn't imagine that tough woman crying. Susan hoped one day she would be as strong and kind as Pearl.



## 25 TIME FOR DOGS

Thursday morning, Susan was excited and talking Pearl's ears off.

Pearl was having a hard time listening. A Charlotte Police officer called the night before to tell her that they had captured the man who had stolen her car and they had her car in the county impound. The only reason the police had called was that Rod complained to the police that he borrowed the car from his girlfriend when he was arrested at a drug bust, that the car was not stolen. Right away Susan made sure that the police didn't give out information about where she lived or give out Pearl's phone number. Susan couldn't wait to get her car.

The challenge was not the money to get it out of the impound facility, because Susan had been saving. The challenge was finding a way to get to Charlotte when Pearl had to work and the weekends were the busiest at the restaurant. She wished she had kept in touch with her sister.

They arrived at the restaurant at the regular time. Susan had quieted down after Pearl's somber responses. Pearl was never talkative in the morning, but as they walked in, Pearl looked robotic. Joe and Polly greeted her and she just walked back to the kitchen as if they weren't there. Both Joe and Polly looked at Susan who lifted her hands and shook her head to say, "I don't know." There was a lot to do before

the breakfast crowd arrived so each person got busy in preparation.

When the place was in order, there were a couple of minutes before

the door opened so Joe walked over to Susan and asked quietly,

“What’s wrong with Pearl? I tried getting her to talk and it’s like a zombie infested her body.”

“I have no idea. She looked pale when I came back in to get her

yesterday after work. She went straight to her bedroom and didn’t talk

or come out all night. She was like this when she got up this morning.

At least her color is back. Her eyes are really red though.”

“Strange,” Joe said. He was puzzled, but customers started arriving

and everyone had to get to work so he thought no more about it.

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Pearl was glad everyone was leaving her alone. She hadn’t heard

from Sam for about twenty-five years. Part of her heart was breaking

all over again, the other part of her heart leapt as though she was still

twenty-five. She wasn’t sure how she felt...other than angry again at

her parents for all they did to destroy her chance at love, for the way

they ruined her life, and then expected her to take care of them. She

loved them though. That’s what always made it so hard. The sound of

Polly’s order brought her back to reality.

“Two eggs over easy, grits, with a side of bacon.”

“Coming up.”

§

Maddie awakened with excitement. She had waited to get another dog until she had settled into the new house. Her last dog was a German Shepherd/Collie mix she named Charlie. He had been a great dog who loved vanilla wafer cookies, horses, and Maddie. He had been hit by some inconsiderate driver speeding down the old country road where Maddie lived before. The ex had let the dog out without concern for his safety. Maddie had been looking for him when she heard the impact mixed with a dog yelp. She rushed to the front of the house as she heard the car speeding away. She had rarely cried before that moment. Part of the tears she cried that day happened because of her loss, but more so the tears of rage at the imbecile so heartless to speed away. She was furious with the ex too. Charlie was such a good dog that even her pop cried when she told him. It was the only time in his life she had seen him cry.

Maddie thought about Charlie all the way to the shelter. Jo Ellen's Shelter was the only shelter in Concord that opened in the morning. She tried working on her pottery, but was so excited that she could not concentrate. She walked out to the barn to see Lightning. It was a cold

morning, but there was a nice trail and the ground was hard. She had plenty of time for a quick ride. As she saddled up the horse, she wondered if she should drive to Charlotte instead of Concord to adopt a dog. That was a stupid idea she thought. She was letting her ex commandeer her life even though they weren't together. So, what if she ran into her in Concord?

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By the time, she finished her ride, she was so enamored with the morning she thought she would take the long way to Concord by going down Gold Hill Road. The countryside was beautiful and brought peace to her when she drove past the fallow fields. She was glad that she had lived her life mostly in the country. She got into her Renegade, buckled up, and turned on the radio. As she backed out of her garage she started singing along with the new song playing that sounded like Shawn Colvin as the singer sang "...Sunny came home with a vengeance." Maddie hoped that this time she was near the end of the song set list so she could hear if it was indeed Shawn Colvin and learn the name of the song. It made her miss the days when there were DJ's who announced in broadcaster voice "You've just listened to the latest song from Shawn Colvin" or whoever was singing and then announce

the name of the song. She would buy more CDs if she knew the names of the songs or artists.

She arrived at the shelter before opening time, but the woman was gracious and let her in early. There was mostly happy barking since it was breakfast time. She talked to Maddie as she worked.

“Do you have a certain breed in mind?”

“No. I usually pick them by personality.”

“That can be deceptive if you’re not familiar with the breed.”

“I understand. I’m pretty good at it. Have had dogs all my life.”

Maddie could tell the woman wasn’t sure if she was telling the truth,

but that volunteer had too many feeding chores to do first. Maddie

knew she wouldn’t get out of the place with a dog without more

interrogation. She was glad of that. Dogs needed the right owner.

Maddie wandered around talking to several dogs and greeting

volunteers as they arrived. They let her spend some time in a playroom

so she could get a feel for the dogs and finally Maddie narrowed her

choice down to two dogs. The problem was that she wanted them

both, but one was a puppy and the other a young three-year-old that

wasn’t house trained. That was too much for her to do alone. She

decided to think it over...and if one of them was adopted before she

got back, then so be it. She told this to the volunteer before she left

and she could see that the volunteer was glad to know Maddie wasn’t

being impulsive.

Maddie was a little sad that she couldn’t choose, but she wanted to

be sure. She didn’t want a dog that would upset her studio. She needed

to talk to Pearl about this and get her opinion. Pearl loved dogs and

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used to have three beloved hounds. She knew the personality of the breeds better than anyone she knew and she also knew Maddie better than anyone else. She looked at her watch. It was the lunch hour. She knew Pearl would be too busy to talk until after work so she went home, got her film canister, and went to the Pharmacy.

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The restaurant was busy with the lunch hustle and bustle, but still everyone was startled when Joe shouted with joy “Josh!” He moved quickly to the door and wrapped his arm around the young man and the young man embraced him back. Both were all smiles. Joe stepped closer to Polly,

“Polly, you remember my son, Josh.”

“Lordy yes I do. I ain’t seen you in years.” Polly had her cat-eye classes on which were no longer in style in the nineties, but she wouldn’t give them up. Josh tried not to raise his eyebrows in judgment.

“It has been a long-time Miss Polly,” as he shook her wet hand. He wiped his hand on his black jeans and then followed as his dad led him into the kitchen.

“Pearl! Look what the dog’s drug in!”

Pearl rolled her eyes to look at the door and then exclaimed “Joshie! How are you doing? Goodness I’ve not seen you in a month of Sundays.”

“I’m doing good! I hear that you’re packing them in with your good cooking. What’s the special for today?”

“Oh, you’re going to love it. It’s my roast beef that’s tender and juicy. I made some of my homemade coleslaw too. We have the red slaw and the white slaw, but the white goes better with the beef. Then we have some white rice, mashed potatoes or green beans.” Pearl was beaming. She loved Josh more than anybody she knew did. She never knew why, but there was something about Josh even when he was a little boy that made her feel maternal towards him. He was always over at their farm helping, mowing, hauling hay up until he started getting into his rock band. Now she knew who to talk about if Susan ever asked her about love. She could talk about Josh’s experiences with love. She could keep Sam her special secret. She hugged Josh and said

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“Let me get back to cooking. I’ll get you a plate right out. What will you have?”

“Give me your favorite combination. You wouldn’t happen to have



any of your apple pie today would you?”

“Not today, but we’ve got a cherry one.”

“Great, I’ll have a piece of that.” Josh sat down in the corner booth where he and his dad usually shared a meal but his dad was looking for someone.

“Polly, where’s Susan?”

“She’ll be right back Joe.”

“Well, where is she? It’s busy in here?”

Polly made a face at him and soon he heard why. Susan came quickly out of the Ladies Room apologizing. She saw Josh before Joe said a word and their eyes locked.

“Susan, I want you to meet my son, Josh.”

She looked at Joe and said in disbelief “You have a son?”

“Didn’t I just say that?”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” She was blushing.

“It’s not like we have time to chat girly,” Joe smiled as he spoke and turned to Josh. “Josh, this is our new waitress, Susan.”

“Nice to meet you.” Josh reached out to shake her hand and Susan saw a tattoo peek out beyond the cuff of his sleeve. She took his hand.

“Nice to meet you too.”

As she touched his hand, he looked into her eyes and smiled. Her

insides melted and she felt weak in the knees. She shook her head then and smiled saying “Back to work.” Her heart beat a racetrack as she walked to greet a new customer who had walked in behind Josh.

Joe never tired of seeing his beloved son. He knew that some of the locals thought Josh was wild because he played in a rock band. They would shit their britches if they knew that his band played mostly in strip clubs. Heck, they might even stop coming to eat with Joe if they read some of the lyrics that Rory Newman’s band sang. He didn’t give a rat’s ass what they thought. His son was smart, talented, and kind.

Joshua Levi Stanford was his finest achievement, even if he was not part of Joe’s life plan. Sometimes things just work out for the good.

Josh loved it when he had time to go to Pleasant Quarry or when a gig brought him down this far on highway forty-nine. Now that a hot chick was waiting tables at his dad’s, he might have to ride down from Charlotte more often. Besides, he loved his old man and always

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enjoyed the quiet of the country when he had time to visit. He looked quickly over his right shoulder to check out the chick’s ass. Yep. She is hot he thought. He turned back to his dad who was grinning like a Cheshire Cat.

“What are you grinning about?” Josh was grinning too.

“Aw, nothing.” Joe winked and then whispered, “There’s nothing better than a pretty girl who is also nice.”

“I’m taking a break from women for a while.”

“Why?”

Josh pulled up his sleeve to show his dad the new tattoo.

“What’s that got to do with women?”

“I was dating this girl and I really loved her. One night we got drunk and she got me to get this tattoo on my hand. It’s the Chinese symbol for happiness.”

“I’m glad you’re happy then.”

“That’s the problem. I got this tattoo to match the one on her hand and then two weeks later she decides to go back to her husband. Then I’m mad at myself for being so stupid to get a tattoo on my hand.”

“It’s a good lookin’ tattoo son.”

“For the rock band, it is. However, Maersk likes for the employees to dress nice and look nice. I’m afraid that the tattoo could be a hindrance to promotions.”

“That makes sense, but if you do good work, they should promote you anyway.”

“I can only hope.” Josh leaned back as Pearl brought him and his

dad a feast. All three of them were smiling. It was all Pearl could do to keep from pinching his sweet cheek, but she didn't want to embarrass him.

Susan had a hard time keeping her mind on her work. She kept trying to remind herself that she didn't need to date another bad boy. Every chance she had she looked at Josh. He was dressed in all black with a black studded belt and Harley Davidson boots. She wondered if he had a Harley. She knocked over a glass of water at the thought. All eyes turned to her and she was embarrassed, but thankful that she was cleaning off that particular table with her back to Josh. Her face had to be beet red.

Joe caught the commotion. He saw everything that happened in his restaurant. More than most folks ever knew. He knew when people

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were having affairs, getting divorced and sometimes he could tell when they were going to be sick or die. He didn't particularly like the part where he could tell when bad things would happen. He liked it when he could see people showing interest or love in another. He saw that Susan kept looking at Josh.

"What are you doing out in my neck of the woods on a Friday

Josh?”

“Just getting back from a gig in Raleigh.”

“Did you leave the bass out in the car?”

“Heck no. I took it by your house so I could take my time here.”

“Do you have a gig tonight?”

“No.”

“Why don’t you stay tonight?”

“Can’t stay tonight. I took yesterday and today off, but I should go into work tomorrow morning. We’ve had required overtime. I don’t want to get too far behind. Maybe I can come back in the next week or two.” Josh’s eyes wandered to where Susan stood taking an order for a customer.

“You do that son,” Joe smiled. They finished their meal in companionable silence.

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The day was slow at Beau’s barbershop. That usually meant he would be swamped on Saturday. He had only had one customer that morning so he closed the shop early. When he got to the house, he decided he was going to call Anna. If Carol could move to the beach and move on without him after forty-five years of marriage, he could move on too. His daughters would be proud of him if he got brave

enough to tell them. He realized he didn't need to be brave. They were always loving and supportive of him once Carol had left, and Anna was a pretty woman. He had always loved pretty women and had never cheated on Carol; just admired others from a distance.

He called Anna and set up a date for the evening for a meal at Ryan's Steakhouse and then a movie. He wouldn't watch a horror movie but he would try to stomach anything else she picked out. She sounded surprised that he called. It had been a while. Even after he hung up, he felt guilty. He felt guilty that he had waited so long to call Anna. Tonight, he would try to make it up. He went to shower. Put on

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his chinos and a nice shirt and splashed on some Polo that his girls had given him for Christmas. He wished that they wouldn't spend so much on cologne, but he did like to smell good.

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Joe and Josh enjoyed a late lunch so much it put Joe in a gracious mood. He decided he wanted the freedom to share a meal with his loved ones. Because of his expansive mood, Joe taught Susan how to work the cash register. She already knew how to do it he could tell, but he wanted her to know that this was another step of trust. She was a

good girl and he wanted to spend time with Josh while he was here. He visited regularly, but the band kept him away too much for Joe's liking. Of course, that's the way children grow up. Josh and Joe were still talking at closing time. Joe liked that he could trust the women to clean up until time to go home. He always relaxed fully in his son's presence.

Susan was filling up ketchup bottles in the back thinking about Josh when Pearl walked up behind her. She jumped and spilled ketchup all over the counter. Pearl laughed and said,

"Girl, why are you so jumpy?"

"Oh, I just got things on my mind." Susan kept her eyes averted because she didn't want Pearl to guess what things.

"I got a good idea." Pearl left with a mischievous smirk on her face.

Susan had no idea what she was talking about.

Pearl saw that Josh was still talking to his dad and walked up to him and placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Joshie, are you going home to Charlotte tonight?"

"Sure am."

Just then, Susan walked out of the kitchen and began refilling the napkins in the napkin holders on the tables.

"Any chance you could give Susan a ride to Charlotte?"

Susan whirled around,

“Pearl, that’s too much to ask!”

“Honey, as I see it, it’s an answer to prayers. You need a ride to get your car and Josh is going to Charlotte.” Pearl did not understand Susan’s response. There she was worrying about how to get her car

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while working and here was the solution. She had a mother’s look of consternation on her face.

“I wouldn’t mind at all,” Josh interjected. “Let me run to dad’s and get my bass first.”

“But what about Rachel?” Susan protested to Pearl.

“I can take care of her,” Pearl volleyed as she put her hands on her hips.

“Who’s Rachel?” Josh asked.

“My daughter.” Susan stood taller. If he reacted badly then he was just like the rest of the bad boys.

“We can pick her up too,” Josh smiled. “I’ll run get my bass while you all finish up.”

“Joe, let Susan go with him. There’s no need for him to back track,” Pearl added before Susan had time to refuse again. She wondered if



the girl was right in the head.

“Fine by me.” Joe hugged Josh, slapped him twice on the back saying “Can’t wait to see you again.”

“Love you, Pop. Ready to go?” Josh smiled as he turned to Susan.

“Are you sure you don’t mind?” she asked.

“I’m sure.”

Susan paused and looked at everyone waiting for her to go. She took her apron off, laid it on the table and then walked out with Josh. What her co-workers didn’t understand is that she didn’t want to have to ask Josh to take her to pick up a car that her ex-boyfriend had stolen. She got Rachel’s car seat out of Pearl’s truck. Her nervousness made it hard to get the seat loose from the middle of Pearl’s old piece of junk. She was beginning to get frustrated when Josh pulled his car beside of the truck and then stepped up to help. It was helpful that his car was a sedan with four doors because it was easier to put it in his car than to battle that huge bench seat in Pearl’s truck. Susan felt like crawling under a rock even though Josh was kind.

As Susan and Josh moved the car seat, Pearl and Joe were watching from one of the windows. Pearl was annoyed with Susan’s behavior and said something to Joe.

“What in the world got into that girl?”

“Can’t you see?”

Neither of them took their eyes off the youngsters while they talked.

“I can see that Josh was an answer to her prayer for a ride to Charlotte.”

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“Never know, he might be another kind of answer.”

“What do you mean?” Pearl looked at Joe then started walking back to the kitchen.

“You got to admit they do look good together.” Joe was still at the window.

“If you say so.” Pearl was hoping that Joe was wrong. She didn’t think she could stand any talk of love. As she started cleaning up the kitchen, she became so aggravated that she began to slam things around. She wasn’t aware of it until Joe called from the cash register.

“What are you doing in there? Trying to wreck my restaurant?” He was pissed.

“Damn it, I’m sorry.” Pearl yelled back.

At this, Joe walked to the doorway of the kitchen with a concerned look.

“Tell me what’s up. I know that’s not like you. I know that.”

Pearl had braced herself on the sink, willing her heart to push down the hurt and pain. She could blame it on the girls.

“Nothing. I’m overwhelmed with the girls, that’s all.”

“I don’t think so.” Joe paused and looked at her. “If you need to talk I can listen and I’m good at listening.”

“And you’re good at keeping secrets, right?” Pearl stabbed him with her words and did not realize how hurtful until she saw the pain in his eyes. He walked back to the register, wordless. She knew she was wrong and she hated that she hurt Joe, especially since she didn’t know what secret Joe and her deddy had shared. She would apologize but she needed to give him some space so she washed up the rest of the pots. She heard Polly as she called goodnight. A few minutes after she was sure Polly wouldn’t return she approached Joe, but he wouldn’t look at her.

“Listen, Joe. I’m sorry. That was not right of me to say that. I’m hurting, but there was no need to hurt you too.”

“Pearl, the reality is that the truth hurts and you spoke a truth. I’m good at keeping secrets and it’s another reason so many people talk to me. Since we don’t have a bar here, I end up being many of these folks’ bartender. The others, I usually can figure them out. You and I will talk about this, but not here and not now.” Joe kept working on the

calculator totaling up some paperwork. “Go on home and I’ll close up.”

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“Do I still have a job?”

Joe looked at Pearl with a weary expression.

“I may be angry, but I’m not an idiot.”

Pearl apologized and left for home. Joe meandered behind her to lock the door. He watched as she drove out of the parking lot. He was going to have to talk to her no matter what he had promised. He was tired of hiding what he knew and he had come to care about Pearl.

As Pearl drove home, she found that she regretted that she was going to be alone tonight. She did not want to be swallowed up with memories of Sam with no distraction. She was relieved when she saw Maddie’s Jeep in the driveway.

“What are you doing here?” Pearl squinted at the sun as she got out of her truck.

“Needed to talk to you about dogs.”

“Dogs?” Pearl brightened at her favorite subject and started to unlock her trailer door.

“I went by the pound today to get me a new dog now that I’m in

the house.”

“Wonderful. What kind?”

“That’s the problem. I have it narrowed down to two and can’t decide. Can we talk about it?”

“Better yet,” Pearl said, “let me change into my jeans and we can talk on the way to meet them.”

Pearl hurried to change into jeans and a tee shirt. Her last dog died a year before her mama and deddy were killed. She hadn’t gotten another because it was too much trouble to keep up with the dogs and then also fight her parents about why they didn’t want her to have a dog. She couldn’t wait to see the dog Maddie was going to get because she always was a good judge of a dog. She put on her tennis shoes, pulled the Velcro closed and then rushed into the kitchen smiling.

“Let’s go, chickadee.”

They hopped into Maddie’s Jeep and talked about the two dogs on the way to the shelter. It was easy to see why Maddie couldn’t decide between the two dogs. Her choices were as different as night and day. The three-year old was a Chihuahua/Dachshund mix that many call a “chiweenie.” The puppy was a Lab/Rottweiler mix and was gonna be a big dog. Pearl couldn’t wait to get her hands on the dogs. She wanted to pet every one of the dogs in the shelter. She was as excited as a kid

in a candy store.

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Once inside, Maddie had to stop and wait while Pearl said cooing words to the dogs in each pen. One of the volunteers went to get the dogs Maddie liked and took them to the playroom. Maddie and the volunteer waited for Pearl while the puppy wagged and the chiweenie shivered. When Pearl entered the playroom, she gasped in happiness.

“They’re beautiful Maddie!” She took the chiweenie from the volunteer as he exited the room. “I can see why you’re having such a hard time. Let the pup go.”

Maddie let her hold of the puppy loose and he ran over to fall on Pearl’s feet. “How old is this fella?”

“They said he’s three months. He’s gonna be a big dog.” Maddie wondered if he would be a chewer.

“He’s already bigger than the little man I’m holding. He seems rather calm for a puppy though.”

“I think he’s shy.” The puppy ran back to Maddie and stood on his hind legs begging to be picked up. Maddie didn’t pick him up yet because she wanted to make this decision with her head and not her heart. Her heart had gotten her into trouble too many times. She had

to laugh at Pearl as she saw her making googly eyes at the smaller dog.

“Looks like you’re in love.”

“Do not say that word around me.” Pearl was momentarily serious.

“What are you talking about?” Maddie was puzzled.

“Never mind. I’ll talk about that another day. Today I just want to relish the dogs.”

Maddie cracked up. “What are you laughing about?”

“Relish the dogs?”

They laughed so hard they scared the dogs. The two of them spent fifteen minutes playing with the dogs and talking about the advantages and disadvantages of each mix. Maddie was amazed at how much Pearl knew about the different breeds and Pearl was glad she hadn’t forgotten all that she knew. In the wink of an eye, Pearl perked up and said,

“I’ve got the solution! We get them both!”

“Pearl, what are you talking about saying ‘we’ when ‘we’ don’t live together?”

“We take them both today. You take the one you want the most and I’ll take the other. Little Rachel loves dogs and this would be a good experience. I could teach her about dogs.”

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“Pearl you don’t even know if Susan likes dogs. Besides, it’s not like they’re going to live there with you forever. Susan has been saving up and now that she’s got a car she’ll get a place of her own soon.”

“That don’t mean I can’t enjoy Rachel’s love of the puppy while they are there. I’ve always wanted a child and this would allow me to teach her something.” Pearl’s confession snuck out without her realizing it.

“Who are you and what have you done with my Aunt Pearl?”

Maddie was frowning and stern.

“What do you mean?”

“First you take in two strangers and now a puppy? That’s not how you’ve been in the past. It’s why I brought you along because you are always careful and plan everything.”

“Maybe I’m tired of planning everything. Maybe all those dang smart plans I made never worked or gave me happiness. Maybe I need to be impulsive for a change.” Pearl had raised her voice causing the chiweenie to shiver more and the puppy to try to hide behind Maddie’s legs. She immediately corrected her voice and demeanor. “Ooh I’m sorry puppies.” She cuddled them and cooed until both dogs were at ease again. She put the little one on the floor and it ran to Maddie



wagging its tail. Pearl spoke in a lilting voice to the black puppy saying “Come here you big boy. Come here.” The forgiving puppy ran to Pearl and fell at her feet. She picked him up, hugging and giggling as he tried to lick her face. “I love puppy breath, don’t you?”

“I love puppies, but not particularly puppy breath.” Maddie was still suspicious about what was going on with Pearl. The volunteer walked in at that moment.

“How’s it going ladies? Made a decision?” The man looked between the two women. He had heard what sounded like laughter or an argument. He really couldn’t tell and was on the phone or he would have walked in then. He looked a bit longer at Pearl. “Are you the cook down at Joe’s Café?”

“Yes, I am,” Pearl answered proudly.

“You are the best cook around. I love your food.” He had been to the Café several times and because he sat in the same booth facing the kitchen he had always watched Pearl. He loved to watch cooks and chefs at their work. He had seen her look out over the dining room like a pastor looking over a congregation of beloved saints. “My wife and I come out there as often as we can. Heck, I come out more

because you cook better than my wife, but don't tell her that." While he was talking, the black puppy had settled at Pearl's feet and the chiweenie had settled at Maddie's. He laughed and said to the humans "Looks like each of you have been adopted."

Pearl and Maddie saw what he meant and laughed with him. Pearl looked with pleading eyes at Maddie as though she were a seven-year old child. A smaller dog would work in the studio.

"Can we have just a moment more?"

"Sure, but remember we close at five." The volunteer left and quietly closed the door. Neither dog tried to leave.

"Pearl, have you thought about what you will do with a puppy when you are at work?"

"I have a back porch and I will fix it for him if we get home soon. It's already getting dark. Of course, I can work on the porch with the light on if you will keep him just this night. Don't want to worry about him with the baby and don't want him getting in the way." She looked at Maddie confident in her ability to care for a dog. She knew she could do anything she set her mind to and it wasn't as if she had never built an enclosure for a dog before.

"Just a minute." Maddie stood, opened the door, and called for the volunteer who was nearby just in case. When the man was back in the

room Maddie asked “We don’t have dog crates with us right now. Can we use some that you have and I can bring them back in the morning?”

“Yes, you can. We do need them back tomorrow, though.”

“Of course. Pearl, are you sure about this?”

“Surer than you imagine.”

“Let’s do the paperwork.”

The man clasped his hands together in a victory sign and then stepped outside to get the dog crates. Maddie looked at Pearl as she gazed down at her new dog. She wished Pearl knew what a beautiful woman she was. She started to say something but Pearl exclaimed,

“I’m going to call him Jack. How do you like that name my sweet puppy?” Jack wagged his stubby tail to signal that it suited him fine.

“What are you going to call your little man?”

“I don’t know. I want to listen to his spirit a little more.”

The man brought them the cardboard crates and the papers in for the women to sign. He talked to them about what each dog loved and needed and soon they were on their way.

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The dogs were in the crates in the back of the Jeep. The noise of the Jeep` seemed to be scaring them so Pearl tried to calm them for

the twenty-minute drive home.

“Can you stop and let me get some dog food?”

“Of course.”

Pearl reached for her purse and realized that in her excitement she had left it at home.

“Darn. I left my purse at home. Can you give me a loan?”

“Better than that, I can just buy the items for you. Now I’ll have visitation rights to the puppy. Glad you thought of it before we passed this Food Lion.”

Pearl sat with the dogs while Maddie made the purchases. She came back with two cart loads of items and Pearl started laughing.

“Where do you think we’re going to fit this in the Jeep?”

“Where there’s a will there’s a way.” She packed what she could behind the back seat. Then the big bag of dog food she put behind Pearl’s seat since she was shorter and could pull her seat up. As they left the grocery, they were quiet but happy. Five minutes later Maddie spoke.

“I never knew you wanted children.”

“I didn’t mean to tell you.” Pearl was calm as she spoke but Maddie could feel old pain that she hadn’t experienced from Pearl.

“Is it because of Rachel living with you?”

Pearl was deep in thought for a moment.

“It’s several things and I don’t want to talk about it anymore.”

Maddie nodded her head and they rode the rest of the way in silence.

When they arrived at Pearl’s home, they took the dogs in, put on the new collars and leashes, and took them on a walk. Pearl and Maddie had always been able to talk without words. In many ways, Pearl had been more of a mother to Maddie than her own mother had.

“Alright, I’ll keep both dogs overnight. That will give you time to work on a shelter. It also gives you the chance to prepare Susan for the little surprise.”

“That’s a good idea. I owe you.”

“You never owe me.”

They walked the dogs through the neighborhood and Pearl met people she had not talked to before. Maddie knew some of them from her mother’s church. A little boy fell in love with Jack and asked if he could help Pearl in any way. She promised that she would allow him to help

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but she had to know his name. He was “Christopher” and he was seven going on eight. Maddie called him “Chris” once and he corrected her that it was “Christopher” in such a way they knew he was polite and

mature for his age. This was promising.

When they returned to the trailer, Pearl hugged and kissed on Jack one more time before Maddie left. She quickly began work on her back porch. She already had screen because she had wanted to screen the porch in since last summer. Once she had the screen up, she knew she would have to get something to keep him covered and warm during the day while they were at work.

While she was making a list of items she needed, Susan and Rachel came through the door with Rachel asleep on her mother's shoulder. Susan was smiling.

"How did it go?" Pearl whispered.

"Let me put her to bed and I'll tell you."

As Susan took Rachel to bed, Pearl peeked out. She recognized the car. She had always liked the Saab 900 model. She guessed it to be an earlier model. Nice car. The black made it look classy. How could Susan have a car this nice and not have a home? Creeping suspicion began to seep into Pearl's consciousness.

Soon Susan was back and still smiling. She sat on the chair beside of Pearl at the kitchen bar and asked,

"Whatcha doin'?"

"Making a list for a surprise. Now tell me how it went with Josh!"

The two talked about the trip. How much of a gentlemen Josh was even after finding out about Rod? Rachel loved Josh, and when they had gotten to the impound facility Josh would not leave until he was sure they were safely on their way. Pearl had to admit to herself that she was happy for Susan. Josh was a good boy, well, a man now. She knew that Susan was a good woman too. In a way, she felt like she had her own family. She paused to let that sink in to her hurt places. Susan was watching her and in a gentle voice asked,

“Whatcha thinkin’?”

Pearl looked up, shook her head “I’ll tell you one day. Let me tell you about my surprise. I adopted a puppy today.”

“Where is it?” Susan perked up more and started looking around her.

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“He’s with Maddie tonight. I needed to turn the back porch into a little room for him and I wanted to be able to tell you before bringing him here. I’ll take care of him, of course.”

“Heck, Pearl, this is your home. You do what you want. You didn’t need to wait to tell me.”

Pearl thought about this for a moment and realized that Susan was

right. She was still living as though she were at her parents' house where she had no authority. She felt stronger.

"You are right. It's been good to be able to get the screen up and think about what I need to do tomorrow without having him underfoot. I hadn't planned on getting a dog, though I don't know why. I've always loved them."

"What kind of dog?"

"He's a Labrador Retriever/Rottweiler mix."

"I grew up with a Rottweiler. They are great with children, as are labs! We named our dog 'Carl' after the dog in our favorite books."

"I've not heard of them."

"They're great. They're written by Alexandra Day. I have all of them so I can read them to Rachel. Dang. I left them in Rod's apartment. Maybe I can go get them on Sunday. Sounds like he'll be locked up for some time. Back to your dog. What did you name him?"

"He looks like a Jack to me. I can't wait for you and Rachel to meet him. He's also big enough at three months that it will be less likely that Rachel will hurt him. I know we'll still have to watch them both."

"You know, you say you've not been around children much, but you have an instinct for these things. You would have been a great mother."



“Lordy, look at the time. We better get to bed, girl, or we’ll be whooped.”

“I’m too excited to sleep right now. If you don’t mind I think I’ll stay up and work a few crosswords till I’m sleepy.”

“I don’t mind. You’re quiet as a church mouse whenever you stay up. You don’t have to ask me that type of thing either. Here’s what we’ll do from now on, we will do our own thing without asking permission. Seems like a lesson we both need to learn. I must admit that I don’t want big changes to the trailer without a discussion. You’ve proven to me that you respect me and I hope I’ve been respectful to you.”

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“You’ve been more than respectful. I’ll never be able to repay you.”

Susan’s eyes filled with tears of gratitude.

“Don’t cry. Just promise me you won’t be a stranger once you get your own place.”

“Of course, we won’t be strangers ever again. You’re our family.”

“Goodnight, honey.” Pearl wiped a tear from Susan’s cheek and then Susan grabbed her for a hug. Pearl didn’t complain because she needed that hug. She had always wanted her own family.

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## 26 A DAY IN A SMALL TOWN

Leah was not a morning person, but she had to be up early on Friday to get her house in order and then prepare for the concert she was accompanying at Rowan University that night. She did not understand how people got up for eight o'clock jobs or classes. She always asked for her classes to be scheduled in the afternoons. She had been lucky it worked out, but she knew that one day she was going to have to do an early class. She stretched under the weight of the covers and looked at the clock. Nine o'clock. It was cold in the bedroom she could see her breath in the air, but she was warm under her electric blanket. She wished for a warm lover to curl up to and then jumped out of bed in anger at the memory of Kat's betrayal.

There was no better motivator than anger to fuel Leah's cleaning frenzy. As she vacuumed, she noticed a piece of paper under the dining table. When she picked it up, there were cat teeth markings all around the paper. The note read:

*Dear Leah,*

*I'm sorry that withholding the fact that I had a daughter hurt you. Even sadder that you felt I lied. I just wanted you to get to know me and that I was a lovable*

*person before you met my daughter. Most women won't give me a chance because I*

*have a child. That doesn't make what I did right and I'm sorry. I hope you will give me a second chance. You would love my daughter too.*

*Kat*

She was glad to discover that Kat had not lied about the note. She read it again and while she was reading, Ms. Cookies curled around her legs and rubbed her head on Leah's shoes like she was trying to shine them.

"Ms. Cookies, you need to stop chewing on papers, silly cat."

The cat looked up in adoration. From the time the cat was a kitten, Ms. Cookies had loved the movement and sound of paper. It was still hard for Leah to read the newspaper without Ms. Cookies jumping into the middle of the section she was reading. She had tried spreading it out on the floor, but then Ms. Cookies made sure to sit her butt down in

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the exact place where she was reading. Leah dangled the note above the cat and played with her for a moment.

"Time to get back to work."

Leah placed the note on the bookshelf and returned to the vacuum.

The minute she touched the handle of the vacuum, Ms. Cookies made

a mad dash to her hiding place while the vacuum monster was running. As Leah vacuumed she thought about how hard it would be to be a single mom trying to meet other women who would be suitable to meet a daughter. Maybe the fact that Kat wanted to date her was sign that she trusted her with her most prized family member. She felt a little guilty that she had been so harsh. Next time she saw her, she would tell her that she found the note a couple of days later. Perhaps they could be friends. At the thought, her body responded as though to say it wanted to be more than friends.

§

Beau awakened exuberant for a change, almost giddy. The date with Anna had gone better than he ever could have planned. After the meal, Anna had invited him to go back to her daughter's house. Anna actually lived in Charlotte and was only in Stanly County while her daughter was out of the country. She was house sitting and dog sitting. After she assured Beau that Big Ben wouldn't attack him again, he was glad to avoid going to the movie. At first, being at her house was awkward, but then Anna began to ask questions about his life story. Before he knew it, they were talking about their lives and children like old friends. Remembering the day with her, he almost skipped as he went out to his truck. Now that was too much. He reconnected with

his inner grump so that the boys at Joe's wouldn't tease him or ask too many questions.

The drive to the Café was beautiful. If someone asked him why he was so happy he would merely say it was a beautiful day. He was glad to be alive. In talking with Anna, he talked to her about his heart attack back in 1993 and it made him glad again to be here still – alive and breathing. His son-in-law had found him on the floor and called the ambulance. It was a miracle he survived. Turning into the parking lot of the Café, Beau was still happy and calm.

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As he opened the door, he noticed that Joe had gotten a different bell to hang on the door. It had a better sound than the cowbell. The cowbell always made him think about how hard his deddy had worked him in the fields as a boy. The smell of coffee and bacon drew his mind back to the Café. He greeted the men at his regular round table. He looked for Susan to take his order, but she was helping another table. As Polly walked by, he leaned back and asked for a cup of coffee.

“Bring me half a cup of coffee and some hot water.”

The men laughed and then teased him because he weakened his coffee so much. Beau laughed along with them. Inside he was still happy

about his date with Anna. They didn't kiss but the talk had felt intimate. That was a new experience for Beau. When Polly brought him his coffee, he placed his order and settled down to listen to the latest news of the town. He held his happiness inside, a treasure for the day.

§

Maddie was glad that she was an early riser. Jack was ready to go out and she didn't want him to get into a bad habit of messing inside the house. The chiweenie did not like getting up early and didn't come out of his crate until Maddie had taken care of Lightning. That worked out good because Maddie could introduce Jack to Lightning. After the introduction, she put Jack into an old pen across from the horse so he wouldn't startle the horse or get stomped on accidentally. She didn't think there would be any problems because Lightning had loved Charlie and they had been good friends. She also knew puppies and horses could be unpredictable in new circumstances. She wondered how the smaller dog would react to a horse. She hoped she had made the right choice. She knew the chiweenie wouldn't run with them when they went out for a ride. She also knew she needed to think about a name for the little man soon. After finishing her chores, she picked up Jack and headed back to the house. She looked at Jack and said, "I think that dog looks like a Tucker. That's a good name don't you

think?”

Jack licked her face in agreement.

Once inside she put Jack down on the floor and opened Tucker’s crate. Perhaps if she left the door open Jack would coax him out. Jack was so happy to be with Maddie. However, that also meant she had a

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black puppy shadow following her every step. She had to laugh as he danced around. She fed him and he waited, looking up at her.

“Go ahead and eat.”

He stood a moment more so Maddie knelt, pushed the bowl under his little head and patted him.

“It’s okay Jack. This is for you.” He started eating, but after the first bite looked up as if to say thank you. “You’re welcome Jack.” She sat with Jack for a short time to assure him he was okay. While she was waiting, Tucker came in with his sleepy ears drooping and crawled into her lap. She melted for both dogs. She was glad that she and Pearl had rescued both dogs.

After she fed the puppies and walked them, she put them in their crates while she put up a pseudo pen for them to play in while she worked. She felt the sides of the pen were to make sure they were

sturdy. Once assured that the pen was puppy safe, she let them both out and put some toys on news papered floor. She began to work on sketches for a statue she had in mind to build. She didn't create many sculptures, but this one kept begging to be created. She only drew a few lines before she heard Tucker whining. She walked over to him and realized that at four and a half pounds he would be able to sit in her lap while she sketched. Jack was busy playing puppy ball. He bounded over when she picked up Tucker, but returned to flop on a ball, then roll on a soft chewy toy. Maddie sat back down and placed Tucker on her lap. He curled up to sleep. She had started to draw again when Jack jumped on the side of the pen and everything tumbled down. He frightened himself of course. As a result, he backed down and whimpered while Tucker barked his head off at the noise. After she calmed both dogs down, it was clear that she would get little work done with two puppies in the house. She took them back down to the living room to play and bond until they were tired enough to be put back in their crates.

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The restaurant was crazy busy. At one point in late morning, Pearl



looked up and saw Sam walking through the door. She could feel the blood rush from her face. She stepped away from the window and back to the fryer. She tried to think of a way to avoid eye contact. She had not seen Sam all those times before, so she would need to stay busy like always. She would spend her time at the stove or fryer and when at the window focus on creating beautiful plates. That would work. Still, her heart beat fast. She was too dang old for this. In disgust at herself she started back to work.

Sam kept looking up at the kitchen window hoping to catch Pearl's beautiful eyes. The time passed had only enhanced Pearl's beauty to Sam and she was a real looker when she was younger. Joe stopped by the table to chat briefly. He had noticed Sam looking for Pearl.

"I gave her your note. You'll have to contact her after work though. It's really busy."

"I understand. Had only wanted to send her a hello. Let me have the special for the day."

Joe took the order. Polly was out sick and he was needed to help Susan. They alternated working the register. His leg was killing him. The extra walking made it worse. He thought he might give in and go to the doctor when he had time. Finally, the restaurant emptied to a lull. While the restaurant was quiet and empty, Joe talked to Susan.

“Did you get your car?”

“Sure did. I appreciate Josh helping me. He’s a nice guy.”

“You don’t know the half of it.” Joe gleamed with pride.

“He was really good with Rachel too.”

“Yeah, he’s always been good with kids. He was an Eagle Scout and in high school worked at Boy Scout camps as a counselor.”

“Really?” Susan chuckled and so did Joe.

“He doesn’t look like a boy scout now does he?”

“Not really.”

The restaurant began to fill again. Susan smiled and then filled up new waters glasses. Joe watched her and admitted to himself that he liked her. Still, it seemed that she was keeping something hidden. It was none of his business, he guessed. As long as she did her work and didn’t interfere with his business...or his son, he would let it go. A customer came up to pay. Joe smiled and began small talk while the customer fumbled with her pocketbook.

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Pearl worked like a fiend in the kitchen. At one point however, she looked up to stretch her neck and looked out into the dining area as she always did. She loved seeing those folks enjoying her meals. She

had forgotten Sam was there until they locked eyes. Sam smiled at her and her knees felt weak. She guessed the heat of the kitchen was getting to her for some reason. She smiled an insipid smile and hurried back to the stove.

Joe had looked up to the kitchen window to see if an order was up and saw Pearl falter. He then looked to Sam and saw him staring at Pearl. After closing, he was going to find a way to get to the bottom of what was going on with Pearl if it killed him. He stepped up into the kitchen to see if Pearl needed help, but she said she was fine. He watched Pearl for a time. She was fast because she was efficient in her cooking and always able to create a quality meal. He wished he had reached out to her earlier – after her parents had died. Joe stepped back down to the dining floor shaking his head. He needed to have a long talk with her. Maybe she would come to his house. He had some thinking to do and there were more changes he had to make. He resigned himself to this. It was only fair, after all.

For once, the place cleared out by two o'clock. Susan had worked hard to do both her work and Polly's. She could see that Joe was in pain and he looked pale to her. Pearl had the kitchen cleaned up with only the grill still running. Joe sat at the booth beside the door and watched traffic for ten minutes. It looked like everyone had gone

home. At two- thirty Joe made the decision to close early. This would give him time to talk with Pearl about a later meeting.

“Let’s close up, ladies. Pearl, I need to talk with you for a moment.”

Susan and Pearl both looked concerned, but they were both confident in the good work Pearl did, as well as Joe’s fairness. Susan grabbed her bag from under the register.

“If you give me your keys, I’ll warm up the truck,” and she left the two with some privacy.

Joe was still sitting near the door. After Susan was out, he locked the door and turned over the sign to closed. He sat back down. God, he was tired. He felt old today. Pearl came down with her pocketbook over her shoulder and her coat on, ready to leave.

“What’s the matter Joe?”

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“I want to talk to you personally. Not here of course and not today.

Could you come to my house this Sunday afternoon?”

“Probably not this Sunday. I adopted a puppy yesterday and we’ll all be adjusting the next couple of days. What about next Sunday? That way the puppy will be familiar enough with me and Susan that I’ll feel better about leaving him.”

“A puppy. Good for you. You were always good with dogs.” He paused and remembered seeing her as a little girl with three hounds.

She was joyous. “Let’s plan to talk next Sunday then.”

“Okay. Have I done something wrong?” Pearl was searching her work and she knew she had done good work, but still she wondered why Joe wanted to talk with her.

“Nothing wrong at all. You’re the best. I need to clear the air with you. I’ll forewarn you I’m also going to ask about this Sam business. I know it’s your business, but if I need to tell him to stop coming in here, I will.” He didn’t look her in the eye in order to give her a moment to take in his words. Out of his peripheral vision, he could see her stiffen and become stoic. He had hit a nerve of some sort. When she finally responded, she was businesslike in her demeanor.

“Of course you can.” Now Joe was annoyed. “Listen, I care about your well-being.”

She didn’t know how to respond. She wanted to be angry but he was her boss after all. The only thing she could think to say was that she understood. She said goodbye and went out.

She got into the old truck and she saw that Susan was curious, but respectful enough not to ask. She grabbed the steering wheel and jerked the truck into reverse. She would have stripped the gears if she

had driven a stick shift. As she backed up she saw Joe watching her from the door. He looked sadder than she had ever seen him look. She didn't care right now. Served him right for being nosy. Pearl hurried to pick Rachel up. She couldn't wait to see her puppy and share the love. As they arrived at the trailer, Pearl forgot her troubles because she saw that Maddie had already arrived and taken the dogs into the house. She looked to Susan who was smiling too. They had not told Rachel yet. Pearl shifted the truck into park and left it running so it would be warm.

"Girls I want you to give me five minutes before you come in the house. I've got a surprise for you Rachel."

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"Oh boy!" Rachel sat forward in the car seat, but fell back from the seat belt holding her in the seat. She would never have thought of a puppy surprise, so she sat back calm and watching. Her glued her eyes on the door of the house. Pearl winked at Susan and hopped out of the truck.

After she got inside the door of the trailer, Maddie let Jack go and he bounded to Pearl greeting her with all his puppy joy. Pearl picked him up and had a kissing match with the puppy. She didn't see the

other dog so she asked,

“Where’s little man?”

“I left him in his crate at home. Figured he could use some quiet time and that it would be easier to introduce one puppy at a time.”

“Good idea.” Pearl put Jack on the floor, took her coat off and ran to the couch. She patted her lap and Jack jumped up on her lap. Pearl had wrapped her arms around him as Susan opened the door asking if it was okay to come in. Rachel was trying to see through the cracked open door.

“Come on in,” Pearl said with glee.

When they stepped in, Rachel squealed with delight and Jack pulled himself out of Pearl’s arms to hide behind her back. Rachel wiggled to get to the pup, but Susan held her firm.

“Wait Rachel. We have to be calm when we meet a new dog.”

“Puppy!” She tried pulling away as Susan knelt to the floor but again, mom held firm.

“Rachel honey,” Pearl used her mildest voice “this is my puppy. If you will sit down in the rocking chair I will let you pet him.”

Rachel’s eyes turned to the rocking chair and Susan made sure she didn’t change paths. Susan took the child’s coat off and she sat with calm excitement. “I want to hold him.” She sat down and patted her

lap. The adults laughed. The puppy was still hiding from the commotion. Pearl talked sweetly to Jack and then picked him up. She talked with Rachel about the correct way to touch a puppy. While instructing Rachel, Pearl petted the puppy and kissed the puppy. When she felt that Rachel was calm enough she walked with the puppy to the rocking chair and let her pet Jack.

Rachel gasped each time she petted Jack “Soft.” She smiled her biggest smile and was gentle in touching Jack. His fear lessened and he licked Rachel’s hand. She giggled. Soon Susan was petting the dog and

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Jack became fearless. Pearl let him down on the floor and he ran from one person to another, begging to be adored. Then everyone was on the floor lost in puppy love. After twenty minutes or so, Maddie rose to leave and Pearl realized she had forgotten some things.

“Maddie, I forgot to go to the hardware to get some Plexiglas for the back porch.”

“You’ll really need that to leave him on the porch. Most of my day today was spent trying to keep him contained.”

“Dang,” Pearl looked at her watch “the hardware is already closed today.”



“They might have something at Sears in the mall. I can’t keep him tomorrow Pearl. I have to go up to UNC-Charlotte to lead a workshop.”

“I’ll figure something out. Thanks for watching him.”

“No problem. The experience made it clear that Tucker was the right choice for my house.”

“I like that name.”

“Me too. Gotta go. Don’t want him to think I deserted him.”

Pearl stood up and hugged Maddie’s neck. “Thank you for reminding me of the joy of having dogs.” She hugged her one more time before she left.

Pearl closed the door and Jack ran to her then stopped, leaning heavy into her legs. Pearl put her hands on her hips and said, “What are we gonna do now Mr. Jack?” Susan had taken Rachel with her to the back to change clothes so Pearl decided to do the same. Jack flopped down the hall behind her. She couldn’t help but laugh at the puppy antics. As she changed clothes, he kept getting underfoot and one time, she stepped on his tail. She comforted Jack and looked at the clock wondering if she had time to go to the Lowe's near UNCC. She didn’t think she could take Jack and hoped that Susan would be able to manage both a puppy and a three-year-old. It seemed a lot to ask,

but Susan was excited about it. She would prepare a hot dog for Rachel and then they could play with the puppy.

Once Pearl got to Lowe's, she got carried away. She had long wanted to close the porch in so that she could have a sunny place to sit when it was cold or windy. In addition to the Plexiglas panels, she bought a small table with a matching chair and a cute dog house. She hoped the dog house was big enough to fit Jack as he grew, but she would deal with that as things happened. She at least knew that the

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new bed that Maddie bought him would fit the area with some room left over. She found a warming lamp that she could plug in for keeping Jack warm outside. She had used those for her chicks at the farm. Jack was going to have a palace.

By the time Pearl returned home, it was dark. She walked in and saw that Jack was half on the couch and half in Susan's lap. As soon as he saw her however, he leapt down and ran to greet her. "You woulda thought I'd been gone for years," Pearl laughed. She couldn't remember when she had been so happy. Rachel was playing in the back.

Pearl put Jack in his crate while she and Susan unloaded the truck.

They leaned the Plexiglas in place and hung the lamp. The night was not so cold and the dog had started to sleep with Pearl anyway. She would take Jack for a walk and then check the weather. Maybe he would be okay tomorrow. She wondered if she could get away from work to take him for a walk in the late morning. She had to find a way to give Jack a break. She knew that with the porch being slats, it might be okay, but she didn't want to have him start a bad habit of messing in her house. She liked to keep a clean house and she wasn't about to tie her baby out. She also didn't want a smelly porch.

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## 28 MEMORIES RETURN

The next day was not as busy as most Saturdays were. Pearl was glad for that, though she was curious where the regulars were. She had decided it would be easier to ask Joe for forgiveness than permission in taking some time to let Jack out. It was good that she lived close. She would only need twenty minutes, at least she hoped that was the case. She watched the dining room carefully so she could be aware when the breakfast crowd was thinning out. She had made arrangement for Susan to back her up. She felt like a teenager trying to sneak out of school. It felt fun and toned down the nervousness inside

of her. She was surprised when Joe was so agreeable but left quickly. On her way to the house, she knew she would have to make different arrangements for next week, but she had all day Sunday to think things out.

§

Leah awakened at ten o'clock, thanks to Ms. Cookies. She wasn't sure how the cat got the bedroom door open. Later, Leah found the cat's bowl empty and knew that Ms. Cookies had panicked. She was a rescue cat so whenever she saw the bottom of the bowl she got worried. Leah filled up the cat bowl and put out some clean water. She cleaned up the litter box and then found she was wide awake. She hoped What-A-Burger was open because she didn't want to eat cereal and she had nothing to cook. She didn't want to be by herself.

Loneliness was the real reason she wanted to eat out for breakfast. She pulled on her winter coat and stepped outside. The day was a warmish day so she went back into the apartment and got a down vest. It was warm enough to walk today.

It felt good to live in a town small enough that she could walk to brunch without worry of being harmed. No matter how butch she dressed, there was no way to hide her hips or other parts of her figure. She had a natural grace that was refined by years of ballet too. She

hoped she could get down the street without the wolf whistles but she

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thought that would be too much to ask in a world full of men who liked to look and gawk. She was pleased that she made it a few blocks without the whistles but as she walked past a truck she heard one of the men suggestively say “mmm hmm.” She didn’t turn to look at him but she could feel his eyes on her ass. “Bastard,” she mumbled under her breath.

“You talkin’ to me?”

Leah turned her head to find that Rick was sitting near the door.

She was red in the face since her first thought was a stranger had heard her comment.

“Goodness, I’m glad it’s just you.” Leah sat down opposite him.

“Just me, I see.” Rick winked at her.

“You know what I mean.”

“Grab a burger. I just ordered and I’m off work the rest of the day.

You don’t mind having lunch with a queen, do you?”

“Never!”

Leah placed her order and returned to visit with Rick.

“Tell me everything,” Rick gushed.

“What do you mean?”

“Well I know nothing about you other than your name, Lisa, right?”

“No silly, Leah. See, you don’t even know my name.”

“I’ve never been good with names but I don’t forget a face or a...

Never mind. I don’t know you well enough to start talking trash yet.

I’m a librarian and I play the organ at the Lutheran church on the weekends. Now it’s your turn.”

“Wonderful about the organ! I’m a pianist and I teach music at Rowan University.”

“We can perform duets. Do you ever go to church? I know a lot of lesbians don’t like churches because of the women’s issues as well as the other issue.” He talked quietly, aware that the burger place was small and that people loved to gossip. It wasn’t as if he was in the closet but he was hoping to protect Leah in case she was in the closet. Rowan University was once a Methodist College so he didn’t know if she had to be in the closet to keep her job. “I got my degree from Rowan University. I studied there in the eighties when it was Rowan College. It was conservative too, but I loved it. Dr. Schaeffer was a great instructor.”

“What a small world. I got my undergraduate at Queens College before it was co-ed then my masters at Manhattan School of Music.”

“Wow. Touch you,” Rick spoke reverently and in respect. “Do you ever conduct choirs?”

“I sure do. I double majored in piano and choral conducting. My goal when I was younger was to become the conductor of the Charlotte Choral Society and then move on up to conduct the Oratorio Singers.”

“How serendipitous! We need a choir director at my church, St. John’s.”

“I don’t know. I’ll have to look at my schedule.”

“Too many women,” Rick looked up slyly.

“I wish.” Leah turned thoughtful and quiet.

“Is that heartbreak?”

“No. Confusion. I was dating this woman and then just this week found out she had a child.”

“What’s wrong with that? Gays and lesbians can be great parents.”

“I know, it’s that she didn’t tell me to begin with and that feels like a lie. She said she tried to let me know but I don’t remember anything at all about her alluding to children.”

“Don’t you like children?”

“Love them, just not sure I want to live with them.”

“Has she asked you to move in?”

“No.” Leah’s order was called. She got up and returned to the table to eat. “I’m not *that* kind of woman!”

“Listen, you’re just dating. Forget about it...unless she starts talking about a U-Haul.”

They both laughed at the old lesbian joke where the second date includes a U-Haul, then finished their burgers.

As Leah walked home, she felt happy. She loved that she had already made a friend. Maybe he was right to check out the water with Kat. She and her daughter had been at the concert last night and the girl was older and polite. It wasn’t as if they were getting married. She felt happy and calm. She opened the door to the apartment, set the keys on her dresser and put her coat in the bedroom closet. She went into the living room to call Kat and see if they could have lunch tomorrow. She was shocked at the mess she found in her apartment.

“What in the hell? Ms. Cookies, what have you done?”

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The books on the piano were all over the floor along with several broken candle holders. Ms. Cookies had spent the time alone racing



up one of her new shades and then down the other new shade. The soft shades were white cotton and gave a subtle light when new a couple of days ago. Now that soft light was spotted with bright points of light and tears where the cat had been climbing them and making a cat playground out of Leah's living room. "Damn cat."

§

Joe wondered what was up with Pearl. She had never taken advantage of him. Well, there was Susan but that was about a human. This was a dog. It wasn't that he minded so much, but the changes seemed sudden to him. The lunch crowd had started picking up before Pearl got back so Joe had to sling burgers again. He mumbled as he prepared another cheeseburger basket and then he laughed at himself. He was upset because he had finally tired of cooking. He liked being able to sit at the cash register or visit customers. He was going to have to give Pearl a raise. He owed her that, and more really.

Pearl walked in happy and regal. She greeted each customer as she made her way to the kitchen. Joe sighed and left the grill, touching her as he went "Tag, you're it." The playful mood infiltrated all the Café that day. The sun had stayed out and warmed up to the point where customers came in without coats. The smiles were broad. There was still time for snow, but not on that Saturday. The day passed quickly

and was full of joy.

Joe decided to leave early because he had filled in for Pearl and did double the work. Pearl laughed at him when he told them, but she also could tell his leg was hurting him. She wished he would go to a doctor but he was a stubborn mule. He left the cash register balancing to Pearl. Polly and Susan were long gone before Pearl finished balancing the register and preparing the deposit to take to the bank. She locked the door as she left and turned to see that Sam was waiting in the parking lot. She was immediately nervous.

“Pearl, can we talk?”

“Well, I have to make the deposit or Joe might get mad at me.”

Pearl swallowed hard and kept her eyes on the ground. Sam leaned

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against the hood of Pearl’s truck. As Pearl moved closer to the truck, Sam stepped away.

“You are as beautiful as ever.” Sam’s voice was full of sincerity and emotion.

Pearl was battling emotions of her own and wished she wasn’t alone. She looked up to see how close she was to her truck. Sam’s head bent down trying to catch Pearl’s eyes. Pearl knew better than to look into

those baby blues. She had done it before and it only caused trouble.

She was too old for that type of trouble and decided to say that.

“Sam, I’m too old for this,” but as Pearl walked by, she caught a whiff of cologne and remembered how she loved the smell. Sam reached out to touch her arm and Pearl jumped from the electricity that flowed through her body at the touch. It was too much.

“Listen Sam,” she said more firmly “I gotta go. Joe left me in charge and I can’t let him down.”

“I still love you. I want you to think about if you still love me. When you’re ready, let me know and we can talk. If you decide that you don’t love me, I’ll never bother you again. When I saw you worked here, I felt like it was an answer to my prayers. It was a chance to see you again and each time I looked at you, I realized you have been the only love for me. It’s why I moved back to North Carolina, in hopes that I could one day run into you again. It’s got to mean something. Just think about it.”

“I don’t know.” Pearl climbed into her truck and Sam moved to keep her in sight and so that Pearl could hear. At the same time, Sam kept enough distance so that Pearl would feel safe. Pearl recognized that. Sam was always good with boundaries and making her feel safe.

“Just think about it. I’ll be on my way.” Sam walked back to a dark

blue Volvo while Pearl watched. Before driving away, Sam caught Pearl's eye and she was mesmerized as if no time had passed since the last time they were together. Pearl locked her door, put her head on her steering wheel and cried.

Maddie had just stopped at the intersection when she saw the Volvo drive away and Pearl's truck still in the parking lot. She pulled up beside the truck and could see that Pearl was upset. Pearl wasn't aware that Maddie had pulled up beside her. Maddie walked to Pearl's truck and tapped on the window. Pearl jumped and when Maddie saw her face, she was worried for her.

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"What's wrong Pearl? Do I need to chase the Volvo and get a tag? Call the police?"

"No, Maddie. I can't," Pearl shook her head and calmed down at this point "talk about it here. Can I come to your house?"

"You don't need me to call about the Volvo?"

"Maddie, it was Sam."

"You're kidding? After all these years? Come on. Get in the Jeep, I'll take you home."

"No, I can't go in and have Susan see me like this. I can't explain

to her.” Pearl was almost hysterical at this point.

“Shhh. Pearl, I meant to come to my home. We’ll have to tell Susan something though or she will worry.” Maddie’s mind was racing. She was the only one besides Pearl and Pearl’s parents who knew the whole story of Sam and Pearl. She shook her head in compassion as she helped Pearl get out of the truck and into the Jeep. “It will be okay, Pearl.”

Pearl could tell Maddie that she had to drop Joe’s deposit off at Cabarrus Savings and Loan and to get her some jeans from the trailer. Maddie didn’t know what to say to Susan but knew she would think of something. She would also have to pick up Jack. She was glad that she always took Sundays off. She knew that it was going to be a hard night for Pearl.

§

Beau and Anna had begun to meet for lunch regularly and this pleased Beau. What had pleased him most was that they had become good friends. Beau wasn’t sure where the relationship would go because as soon as Anna’s daughter returned from Europe, Anna moved back to Charlotte. That distance might as well be another continent away for Beau. He never liked to wander far from home. He hated the city.

Imagine his surprise when his daughter, Carla, told him that Carol was moving back to Pleasant Quarry. Carla did nails for women in the front part of his barbershop. She only worked there a couple of days a week, but it was nice to see her and keep up with Carol through conversations with their daughters. Beau was trying to figure out a

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sneaky way to ask Carla why Carol was moving back when Carla offered,

“You know deddy, I think she misses you.”

“She shoulda thought a that before she left me.” He was stubborn and mad. “Tell her I’m datin’ someone else.” He huffed back to his barber chair since he didn’t have a customer. He started rinsing his combs and brushes. Carla followed close behind, excusing herself to the customer there.

“What do you mean deddy? You didn’t tell me or Betty.” Carla was interested because she had often said that Beau needed to get out more often.

“I didn’t want to alarm you girls.” Beau was embarrassed that he spoke now. He sprinkled some comet into the sink and scrubbed the sink hard although he had cleaned it earlier. You could never keep a

barber shop too clean.

“I’m happy for you deddy.” Carla came up beside him and put her arm around him, pulling him close by her side. “I can’t talk about it now because Belle will spread everything around town,” she whispered, “but I’ll catch up on the news after she leaves.” She gave Beau a peck on the cheek and returned to her customer.

Beau couldn’t stand the thought of having to talk to his daughter about dating someone. It was none of her business since her mother had left. It wasn’t that Beau didn’t trust his daughter, he only had too much pride to talk like that with a woman. He decided he would go work on one of his old cars. One of them was always needing rust rubbed out of the chrome. That would give him time to think.

“I’m going to go work on the Chevy.”

“Which one?”

“The ’52. Gonna get the rust off the fenders.” Beau wanted to slam the door, but he knew that Belle would jump out of her skin and then talk about it for a week. That woman could turn mud into some type of drama. He was distracted as he walked to the garage and soon realized he had left his coat in the shop. He wasn’t about to walk back in there though. Belle would laugh at him. He started scrubbing on the fender with steel wool hoping that would help him warm up. Five

minutes later Carla brought him a coat and he mumbled a sheepish thank you. He was determined not to talk to her about Anna or Carol.

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By the time Maddie pulled up in Pearl's driveway, she knew what to say. Pearl was grieving a life lost, and part of her was rejoicing at a chance of a life to come. She couldn't be around the girls tonight. She told Susan that she and Pearl needed some time to catch up on an old customer that was a mutual friend at one time. She grabbed a change of clothes for Pearl and put it in an old shopping bag. She fumbled through Pearl's closet to find her riding boots. They were hidden in the back of the closet. Maddie didn't have a second horse right now, but maybe Pearl would ride Lightning...and hopefully Lightning would let Pearl ride. Jack kept trying to help with the shoes and soon had Maddie laughing "You are no help."

She put Jack in his crate and he whined. Susan told Maddie that she would be glad to take care of him but Maddie knew Pearl would need him. "One of the things Pearl wants to do is help the horse get used to Jack and Jack get used to horses. We can work on this together." It wasn't necessarily a lie. "Have fun."



When they arrived at Maddie's, Pearl grabbed her clothes and Maddie carried Jack. Pearl was somber and silent. After they got into the house, Maddie ran some water into her Jacuzzi so that Pearl could soak off the day. She hoped it would calm her down some. Pearl had gone straight to the guest room and flopped on the bed. Jack began to bark wanting to go to Pearl's rescue so Maddie took the crate to her while the Jacuzzi filled. Maddie let Jack out and he tried to hop on the bed. "Do you want him up there on the bed with you?" Pearl nodded her head. "I'm running a hot bath for you. There's an extra robe in the closet I keep for guests. I'll go make something for dinner." Maddie picked Jack up, put him on the bed, and watched him run to Pearl's rescue. Pearl nodded that she understood and wrapped her arms around Jack. Jack tried to kiss her sadness away.

After taking Tucker out, Maddie turned on the radio to listen to NPR. She hoped that the sounds of the radio would feel like Pearl had privacy. Maybe the sounds would calm her. She was only ten when Pearl had to go away to some doctor, but she knew something bad had happened to Pearl. Not from Pearl's parents or the neighbors, but because Pearl wasn't the same lively person when she returned from wherever she had been sent. She knew it had something to do with

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Sam. When Maddie was older, Pearl had explained that much, but Maddie didn't know the details. She had just started some oyster stew when the phone rang.

"Hello."

"Maddie, this is Joe. Did Pearl make the deposit?"

"Of course she did. How did you know to call here?"

"I called Pearl's house first and Susan told me she was at your house? Is she okay? She seemed fine today when I left or I wouldn't have left."

"She's okay. What did Susan tell you?"

"Some folderol that Pearl was catching up with you. I don't care what you say, that ain't like Pearl."

"She needs to talk and I can listen." Maddie waited for him to say something more. She could almost hear him thinking over the phone.

"I don't know what to tell you Joe. It's her business, you can ask her."

"Get her on the phone then."

"She's in the tub and I don't mean interrupt her either. You're going to have to leave her alone for a while. This is her business."

"Damn it, she's my employee." Joe huffed through the phone and knew it was the wrong thing to say because he didn't mean that. He

couldn't think of anything else to say that wouldn't tip Maddie off to what he knew. "Bye."

Maddie looked at the phone as she hung up. What an odd conversation.

§

After hanging up, Joe paced his kitchen until his leg acted up again. He sat down in front of his television to watch the news hoping to get his mind off of Pearl. The news only caused him more worry. He turned the news off, made a cup of coffee and sat down at the bar near the phone. He was tired of hiding the truth no matter what he had promised his dad. Working with Pearl had been the easiest and hardest thing he had ever done. It was time to start telling the truth and making things from his past right. He picked up the phone directory and left a message for his attorney to call him first thing on Monday.

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The warm day had turned to cold rain before Pearl got out of the tub. When she walked into the kitchen Maddie noticed the puppy was wet. "Did he fall in?"

"Heck no. He dove in. Remember he's part lab. I turned your jets

off and we had a good time. I'll admit to showering off afterward.

Never wanted to take a bath with a dog, but between the bath and the dog, I was able to break away from that crying jag. I hate crying." Pearl watched the puppy rolling on his back while she talked.

"They say crying is good for you." Maddie looked at Pearl as she set out the bowls.

"Bullshit." Pearl looked her straight in the eye as she responded.

"I'll have to say I agree. Okay. We've got oyster stew and crackers for dinner tonight. What you want to drink?"

"I'll take a Pepsi. Mama always made oyster stew on cold nights like this and you have to drink a Pepsi with it."

"Lucky for you I have one left over from the House Blessing. Do you mind if I drink a beer?"

"Of course not. Who do you think I am? My mother?" They both laughed at this.

"I'll take the dogs out and feed them. How about you get the stew ladled out?"

"Deal."

After Maddie fed the dogs she changed the radio station to some dinner music. She and Pearl took their stew to Maddie's oak table. The dogs followed close behind, hopeful beggars. They both agreed they

weren't feeding the new pups from the table, but the puppies didn't know that yet. Maddie added a cracker to her stew and then began to eat. That is until she watched Pearl's preparation. Pearl crumbled handfuls of crackers into her stew, then salt, then pepper. She stirred and then added more crackers. Maddie laughed,  
"Like a little stew with your crackers?"

"Don't laugh, it's how I always make my stew. It has to be the right combo."

After that, they ate quietly, though often laughing at the dogs. Soon the dogs began to chase each other, racing through the house.

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When the meal was over and the kitchen cleaned, Maddie needed to feed Lightning so Pearl took the dogs for another walk while Maddie did her chores. The sleet began in the middle of the chores. Pearl had finished walking the dogs and went just inside the barn to see if Lightning was okay with dogs. The dogs were rambunctious at the sight of the horse, so Pearl decided it better to return to the house. She didn't want to deal with animal nervousness after today. Pearl stacked firewood and kindling near the fireplace. This was a perfect night for a fire. Maddie came in the back and took her boots off. Pearl heard

them clunk to the floor.

“I should have built a mud room. I don’t know what I was thinking.” Maddie spoke as she walked from the back door to the fridge.

“Maybe I could help you build one this spring. I helped deddy with the one at the old farm house.”

“I might take you up on that.” Maddie grabbed a beer. “Do you want something else to drink, some milk, coffee, tea?”

“I want to try one of your beers.”

“Are you sure? I like the dark beer.”

“Yes, let me try one.”

Maddie got her one of the Negro Modelo beers she had, popped the lid, and poured it into a mug. She didn’t know Pearl was a drinker and wondered if this was her first beer. As if reading her mind Pearl said, “This is not the first time I’ve drunk.”

“Oh yeah. You had me get that Kahlua for you at Christmas.”

“I like that stuff. I’ve had beer before.”

“When?” Maddie was surprised. Pearl’s family was very conservative and straight laced.

“When Sam and I first dated.” Pearl took a sip of her beer and both were quiet. Pearl’s eyes were tired of crying and she hoped the beer

would calm her enough that it wouldn't start again.

Maddie hated she asked. She wanted to talk to Pearl, but had never seen her cry like that, not even after she had returned from the doctor.

At the same time, she knew that Pearl probably needed to talk. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"I don't know." She paused, took another swallow of beer. "This is good. I don't like that light stuff. Tastes like horse piss."

"When have you ever tasted piss?"

"You know what I mean."

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Both watched the fire burn and listened to the wood sizzle. The dogs finally came back to the living room and each dog curled up beside his respective owner. Pearl began to rub Jack's belly. Then he climbed up in her lap and curled up. She looked into the fire and petted Jack mindlessly and gently.

"Sam is my only love, you know?"

"You told me that I remember. How long did you talk?"

"Not long. I acted like I was busy...you came up just in time." Pearl paused some more. "Maddie, I think Joe thinks Sam is a man."

"Really? Joe's usually very perceptive of such things."

“Well, she always was a little flat and it looks like she’s lost some weight.”

“What happened to you two?”

“Like I told you, it was 1969 and I lived in the country.”

“I was sixteen when you told me the story. I was surprised that you had been in a lesbian relationship, but was so glad not to be alone I don’t remember the details. You were my hero and my safe place.”

“Sam was always my safe place.” Pearl picked Jack up and held him close to her heart. She nuzzled the dog a little bit and then he wiggled back to her lap. Pearl took a deep breath before speaking again. “I think I only told you that we had to break up and that’s why I was alone.”

“That sounds right.” Maddie racked her brain trying to remember all that Pearl had told her, but instead remembered her first love. Her eyes glazed over for a minute and Pearl noticed.

“You don’t want to hear some old woman’s story. Let’s talk about you.”

“You know everything about me.” Maddie shook her head. “I was trying to remember what you had told me back then. You were consoling me because I was afraid.”

“By the time you talked to me things had changed a lot. I’m glad



you didn't have to go through what I did."

"You mean the heartbreak?"

"No, I mean the part I didn't tell you about." She took another deep breath. Shifted the dog from her lap to the seat beside of her. She looked up at the ceiling and crossed her arms across her chest. Maddie saw her discomfort.

"You don't have to tell me anything else Pearl."

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"I need to tell someone Maddie. My parents are dead and I don't have to protect them anymore. It's not like they tried to protect me at the time though."

"Did folks in town find out."

"God no or my parents would have killed me. They almost killed me anyway."

Maddie waited. She knew that Pearl's parents were tough on her, but she didn't think they had pulled a gun on her. Pearl continued after a time.

"Do you know that there was a time that people would use electroshock therapy to try and 'cure' homosexuals?"

"Yeah. I read about it in some history book."

“They did that to me.”

“What?” Maddie exclaimed.

“Well, after Johnny Goodman was no good at converting me from my sinful ways with his ‘manly’ ways, my parents found a psychotherapist in Morganton who would treat me with electroshock therapy. My mother had a friend who had heard about someone else being treated at Broughton.” Pearl looked at Maddie pointedly “Can you believe that my parents put me in Broughton for a week?”

Maddie was so stunned that all she could do was shake her head no.

“They did. Three times a week the Broughton staff showed me pornography of lesbians while I was hooked up to the electrodes. They had put electrodes on my groin, thigh, chest, and armpits. When my heart rate went up, they zapped me. There were burn marks on one of the other women who was there. She was more of a dyke than Sam and her parents had sent her there several times. One of the guys ended up committing suicide.” Both Pearl and Maddie were still. The puppies were quiet as though they could sense something was wrong. Maddie watched Pearl to see if she was going to break down again. Pearl was staring into the past, or some other part of her mind. Maddie didn’t know what to say so she said nothing. Pearl looked up at her after a

minute.

“Don’t think less of me Maddie.” Pearl felt vulnerable.

“I could never think less of you. That was wrong of your parents.

If nothing else, I think more of you because of your bravery.”

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“Pshaw. I wasn’t brave. I never spoke to Sam again. I didn’t want to go back to that place. If I had been brave, I would have left home like Sam asked and never come back here.”

“Why didn’t you leave?”

“At the time, I wanted children. Deddy wanted to get me out of Broughton after the first treatment when he found out what they did. Mama was against it and kept saying how I was like him. I don’t know what she meant about that because everybody knew he loved women. On the days they didn’t do the electroshock, we had therapy. I told deddy I wanted to stay for what they paid. I wanted children and maybe the doctors could help me like men so I could have a family.” Pearl paused and pulled her legs together and her arms tighter. “I couldn’t even feel when I left there. I never liked men that way. Never could. Oh, and I’ve hated Johnny Goodman ever since. All that treatment did was make me an emotional wreck. Since I was damaged goods I figured

I might as well just take care of mama and deddy.”

“Did Sam’s visit make you remember all of that bad stuff?”

“No,” Pearl looked into Maddie’s eyes with a softness Maddie had never seen “I think of that bad stuff all the time. Have nightmares about it. What Sam’s visit did was to remind me of love. After all this time and all that crap, I still love her. It wasn’t her that hurt me but my parents.”

“This is a lot to take in.” Maddie stretched out and guzzled the rest of her beer. She leaned over and started to peel the label off the beer bottle as she thought about Pearl’s story. Pearl watched and suddenly grabbed the bottle out of Maddie’s hands.

“You’re making a mess.” Pearl picked up the papers at Maddie’s feet and then walked into the kitchen. “Do you want another one?”

“Better not. I want to be able to stay up as long as you need.”

“I’m not staying up much longer. I’m whupped from all this emotional mess.” Pearl began to run water into the sink to wash the dishes. She rinsed the beer bottle out. “Here, put this in your recycle bin.” Maddie followed orders and felt stiff.

She was sad for Pearl because she was a wonderful woman who could have had happiness. Pearl had worked at Rowan College in the cafeteria when Sam was a student there. From the story Pearl had told,

Maddie always assumed that Sam had found someone else. She knew that Pearl's parents were conservative and stoic, but she never thought

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they were mean, just harsh. Yet, you never know what happens behind the closed doors of a home.

"Pearl, I don't know what to say."

"There's nothing to say really." Pearl washed the last spoon and pulled the plug from the sink watching the water as it swirled down the drain. She turned on the faucet to spray the bubbles away.

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know." Pearl grabbed the hand towel and dried her hands.

"I figure my life is finally my own, but I can't say I know what to do.

I've been so used to people telling me what to do."

"That reminds me, Joe called earlier. He was being nosy."

"Great."

"I told him that your business was your business."

"Good answer. I will reply the same. Girly," Pearl put the towel on the handle beside the sink "I'm going to have to go to bed."

"You've not called me that since I was twelve."

"Thanks for listening." Pearl put her arm around Maddie's waist

and they turned to go down the hall. “You are a good friend.” Maddie hugged her and turned out the light in the kitchen. The dogs hopped up from where they had been sleeping and followed each mom into separate bedrooms.

§

Jack got wound up after Pearl put on her night shirt. She played with him for a while and then tried to get him to curl up again, but he was determined to run all over the bed. Pearl needed the quiet of night to think. For once, she could make her own decisions. She didn’t have to worry about what anybody thought...except Joe. He was her boss, but she didn’t think he would fire her if he knew. Jack jumped on her stomach and knocked the breath out of her. “Okay little man, you’re going into the crate tonight.” She kissed him on the head before she put him in the crate. He whined a little but soon settled down. She might have to rethink letting the little bugger sleep in her bed.

She lay on her back with her hands behind her head trying to think everything through. What was she going to tell Sam if she asked more questions? She would like to have dinner with her but where could they go? It was the first time she regretted that Susan and Rachel lived with her. Pearl rolled over, fluffed her pillow. She was not going to live in

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regret anymore and besides, she loved Susan and Rachel. She laid her head on the pillow, said her prayers, and hoped to God she would dream of Sam.

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27 LIFE ON A SUNDAY MORNING

Leah had meant to get up early enough to go hear Rick play the organ but she was too tired. She liked church, she just didn't like getting up that early. Why couldn't they have church at four in the afternoon? She knew some of the Metropolitan Community Churches (MCC) had church at night, but she didn't want to drive to Charlotte. She had moved to the country to get away from the city. It was hard that she lost some of the freedom of being a lesbian in the city. She and Ms. Cookies were sitting on the couch meditating over the Sunday Observer when the phone rang. Leah ignored it and took another sip of coffee. The cat swished her tail, annoyed at the sound. The phone continued to ring since Leah had forgotten to hook up her answering machine. Finally, she picked up and answered with annoyance,

"Hello."

“Hi, this is Kat.”

“Hey. What’s up?” Leah was cold in her tone. She was enjoying coffee and quiet time with the cat. Not that the cat drank coffee.

“Thought I would see if you would like to go to a movie with me and Angela.”

“I don’t know,” Leah loved movies so she might be tempted “What are you going to see?”

“101 Dalmatians. We didn’t get to see it at Christmas.”

“I love dogs. Guess I should meet Angela. What time and where?”

Leah hopped up from the couch and took her coffee cup to the kitchen sink.

“We’re going to Concord. We can eat at the K&W or Shoney’s afterward. Angela likes Shoney’s the best.”

“Shoney’s sounds great. I love their Slim Jims. What time?”

“Concord Mall has it showing at four o’clock.”

“Great, I’ll meet you there.”

“Why don’t I pick you up at your place? That way Angela can see where you live and meet Ms. Cookies. She loves kitties.”

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“That’s okay, I’ll meet you there.” Leah looked at Ms. Cookies who



did not like children.

“I insist. See you at three thirty. Bye.” Kat hung up before Leah could protest.

“Ms. Cookies. I have some bad news.” Leah tried to think of how to introduce Angela to the cat without the cat biting her. She would have to be blunt.

Kat and Angela were late getting to Leah’s so the cat was safe for a couple of hours. Angela was sitting in the front seat when they arrived and it was clear the kid did not want to get out of the front seat to let Leah sit up front. Kat began to argue with her till Leah interrupted.

“It’s okay. She can stay there. I don’t mind riding in the back.” Leah climbed in the back and Kat was smiling at her. Leah returned the smile as Kat backed her Comanche out of the drive, but inside all she could think about was how the girl seemed really rude.

When they got to the theater, they were late there too and missed the previews because Angela wanted to get so many treats. When they did sit down, Kat put Angela between them. Leah wished she had stayed with the cat. The movie was fun however, and soon Leah was engrossed enough to get out of her funk. She loved hearing a child’s laugh even if the child was older. By the time the movie was over everyone was smiling and happy. When they went to eat, Angela got

into the back seat of her own accord. Leah guessed it must be hard to share her mom, but wait, now Leah wondered if Angela knew this was a date. Then Leah thought to herself, maybe it wasn't.

§

Pearl and Maddie had lazed around all morning. The sleet had not lasted, so there was only dampness on the cold ground. Mid-morning, Maddie convinced Pearl to go for a ride on Lightning. They left the dogs in the house and Maddie saddled up Lightning while Pearl talked to him. Maddie was sure that everything would be fine since Pearl had been around horses most of her life. Still, she stayed with Pearl in the corral till they were both sure Lightning wouldn't throw Pearl. When it was clear that everyone was comfortable, Pearl took a ride down the trail.

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She knew that Maddie was trying to get her mind off the subject of Sam, but all she could think about was Sam. For all those years, Pearl had pushed Sam and their love out of her mind. She worked hard to forget everything they shared. Sam had gone back to Long Island all those years ago. What else could she do? Her mom and dad had badgered her about dating men and she tried once or twice. Later she

found out she was sterile and decided there was no way she would put up with a man if she couldn't have children. It was at that time that she gave up on love and family. She began to live a life that was nothing more than a daily routine of dead exercises. Much of her life, she had lived for others; her parents more specifically. Now she was free. It felt good and scary at the same time. As she returned from her ride, she decided that if Sam wanted to go to dinner ever again, she would take the chance. She hoped that Sam would come back again.

As Pearl and Lightning returned to the edge of the woods, Pearl saw Maddie trying to teach Jack to fetch. Pearl stopped the horse behind a large oak and prayed that Jack wouldn't see her before Maddie could grab his collar. Maddie had just picked him up when Tucker saw the horse and started yapping. Lightning startled and Pearl hoped that if he bucked, she still had her rider's sense of what to do. She had been a good horsewoman once in her life. When did she give that up? Where had she gone in all her life? Who was she? How had she given up the many things that had mattered most to her? The horse settled and seemed curious about the little dog who seemed to know to keep his distance. Pearl didn't want to take a chance of the horse stepping on the Tucker or for the dog to startle the horse. She dismounted and led the horse the rest of the way to the barn. Maddie kept the dogs with

her until Pearl got Lightning into his stall. Maddie set the dogs into the pen. Once Lightning was in and calm, Pearl and Maddie changed places. Then Maddie began unsaddling the horse.

Pearl felt alive and strong. She felt the straw under her boots. She smelled every scent in the barn. She could sense the horse's curiosity about the dogs and the dogs' curiosity about the horse. She squatted down beside of the dogs and talked to them while Maddie unsaddled the horse and brushed him down. Then the two women talked horses until Maddie was finished. As they left the barn with the dogs, the horse neighed and whinnied. He had liked the company.

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Susan was surprised when Josh stopped by on Sunday morning. She and Rachel had gotten up to go to church, but there was a knock at the door after breakfast. She thought it must be Pearl who needed help unloading Jack. Susan was still in her robe and flushed with excitement when the open door revealed Josh instead. She invited him in and ran to the bedroom to put clothes on. Rachel ran out in her pajamas and jumped on Josh while he waited.

Josh had come into town from Charlotte to visit his dad, but stopped by to see if they wanted to go to lunch with them. The three

of them picked Joe up at his house and then rode into Concord to eat barbecue at Troutman's Barbecue. They laughed and had fun together. Then they went to Cabarrus Creamery and got ice cream. Joe was wonderful with Rachel. Susan saw a beautiful side of the man. It was clear he loved his son more than she could imagine. Susan wished the day would never end. She felt at home with these men and she could see that Rachel did too.

When Josh dropped them off at the trailer, he said he would call later. Pearl was still not back and Rachel was asleep on her mom's shoulder. Susan put Rachel to bed and went back to the couch. She missed sex. Every time she was near Josh, that man reminded her of how much she loved men. She wondered if there was any way for them to be alone and wondered how long Pearl would be gone.

§

Leah hated mixed messages. She wasn't sure what Kat was doing. At first, she thought she was trying to make amends with the afternoon movie. Things went well at dinner, but then they suddenly had to get home so Angela could get ready for school the next day. Leah was pondering events as Ms. Cookies walked back and forth across her lap, waiting for her mother to adore the cat with proper dignity. Leah began to pet the cat absent-mindedly, when the phone rang. The cat ran away,

foiled again.

“Hello.”

“This is Kat. Angela’s gone to bed so I thought I would call and say what a great time we had today.”

“Yes, it was nice. Thanks for inviting me.”

“Angela is with her dad next weekend. Would you like to go out?”

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“What do you have in mind?” Leah wasn’t sure she wanted to go, though she wouldn’t mind another roll in the hay.

“I could come over there and cook you a gourmet meal.”

“Now that’s an idea. What will you cook and I’ll get a bottle of wine?”

“Let me surprise you. Go with white wine, a little dry. I’ll bring some other surprises too. See you Friday night?”

“I’m off on Friday so that’s good for me.” Leah and Kat set a time and she was smiling after she hung up thinking how good it was to date again. Surely, Kat had to be a good person if she had a daughter. She couldn’t wait until Friday. Her body was excited too.

§

Pearl got Maddie to take her to her truck after the trail ride. She was

ready to be home for a while. The sun shone brightly as they pulled into the Café parking lot. As she opened the Jeep door she felt silly for crying so hard.

“Listen Maddie, I’m sorry to put you out like I did. I know it seems silly.”

“Pearl, it doesn’t seem silly at all. After hearing your story, I’m surprised you haven’t cried more.” Maddie gently took Pearl’s arm “If you need me to, I can give you the phone number for my counselor. Diane Moore is in Charlotte and she helped me get past the crazy women.”

“I’m sure I’ll be okay, but I’ll keep that in mind.” She got out and reached into the back seat to get Jack’s crate. Pearl moved a bit more timidly as she left the Jeep. “Thanks again,” she called back.

Pearl could see that Maddie was waiting to make sure Pearl’s old truck would work. It rattled and coughed, but cranked up fine. She waved to Maddie to let her know everything was okay and started to her trailer. She was glad that her place wasn’t far from the Café. When she got home, Jack started a happy bark. “Come on boy, let’s go see the girls.” She was tired but happy to be home. Inside the trailer, Rachel had obviously gotten up from a nap. Her hair was all over the place and she moved slower than when she was awake. She had her thumb

in her mouth and a blanket under an arm. Pearl kissed her on the head and set Jack's crate down. Susan sat up groggy from her own nap.

"Welcome home," she yawned.

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"Looks like we came home to the sand man's house."

Rachel was listening and standing close to the crate, but not speaking. Pearl bent over and let Jack out. Since he was wide awake, he jumped on Rachel and knocked her down with kisses. Before she could react, Pearl scooped her up and sat down on the couch beside Susan. Jack raced to greet Susan, trying to get on the couch by crawling on her legs.

"Silly puppy." Susan yawned again. "What time is it?"

"About three thirty I think." Pearl caressed Rachel's hair as she leaned into Pearl.

"I must have fallen asleep right after I put Rachel down." Susan continued to pet Jack on the head while keeping him off the couch.

"Now I know I don't have to worry about wild parties with you two."

"We did go to lunch with Josh and Joe." A sheepish smile crossed Susan's face, but she kept her focus on Jack.



“Do tell. Are you going to give me the news?”

“Let me take Jack for a walk and when we get back I’ll tell you. It was a lovely day.”

Rachel continued to cuddle with Pearl while Susan got Jack’s leash and took him out the door.

Walking around the neighborhood would help Susan wake up from the sexy dream she had about Josh. She wanted to tell Pearl all the details about the lunch, but her body was revved up from the dream. In the dream, she was walking down a street with Josh. He pulled her into a cozy bar where they danced the Lambada. She wondered if Josh could dance, maybe they could learn that dance. What happened during the dance though was that they moved to a dark corner of the dance floor and she pressed him against a wall. His hand began to move up her skirt.

“Hey lady, can I pet your dog?”

“Hm? What?” Susan jumped.

“Can I pet your dog?”

There was a little boy asking to pet Jack while Jack pulled hard at the leash trying to kiss the boy.

“Sure, but do you know how to properly approach a new dog?”

“No.”

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“I know that this is a puppy but always keep your fingers tucked in and let them smell your hand before you touch them. Thank you for asking before petting him.”

“My grandpaw always tells me to ask first.”

“Are you visiting him today?”

“Naw. I live with grandpaw and grandmaw. My mama’s in prison and I don’t know my deddy.”

Susan’s heart lurched in sorrow for the boy. He looked to be around seven and he was neatly dressed and clean. He giggled as Jack jumped on him and kissed his face. Once Jack jumped and almost knocked his glasses off.

“What’s your name?”

“Antonio. What’s yours?”

“I’m Susan.”

“What’s the name of your little girl?”

“She’s Rachel?”

“What’s her grandmaw’s name?”

“Mrs. Belk.”

They stood watching Jack together. Susan was getting cold and she had

a warmer coat on than did Antonio. She had an idea suddenly, but needed to talk to Pearl first.

“Antonio, where do you live?”

“Over there in the green trailer.” He pointed to the trailer with a beautiful yard. Susan hoped to landscape Pearl’s yard like that in the spring.

“Do you think I might ask your grandmother questions after a while? I need to check on something in my house first.”

“Sure. She likes company.” He stood up and ran towards his house yelling “See ya later Miss Susan.”

Susan smiled and hurried back to Pearl’s. When she got inside Rachel was still hugging hard on Pearl. She took the leash off Jack and he went to Pearl’s feet to lie down.

“Looks like somebody missed you.” Susan smiled, loving the sight of Rachel hugging Pearl.

“Well I sure missed somebody too.” Pearl lightly touched Rachel’s nose and she smiled, but never took the thumb out of her mouth. Pearl looked up at Susan who still had on her coat “Take your coat off and stay a while.” Susan laughed.

“I just met a little boy outside. He might be someone old enough to take Jack out at lunch.”

“You think they will let him off school to come home and take our dog out?” Pearl winked at Susan.

“What was I thinking?” Susan rolled her eyes, took her coat off, and hung it on the coat tree behind the door. She sat back on the couch beside Pearl and Rachel. Jack stood on his hind legs begging politely to sit in her lap. She pulled her legs up on the couch and then pulled Jack up into her lap. The four of them sat peaceably for a few minutes before Pearl spoke again.

“Susan, you know I never try to interfere in your life,” She saw Susan’s guard go up on the defensive “but I really think your parents would welcome you and this angel.”

“Pearl, I’ve been saving for an apartment and now that I’ve got my car we’ll be able to move out in a month or two.” Susan answered, defensively.

“Honey, I’m not asking you to move out. I love you girls. Relax, honey.” Pearl patted Susan’s knee that was closest to her. The puppy kissed her hands. “I didn’t mean to scare you. You two are welcome here as long as you like. I hate I upset you because that wasn’t what I meant.” She could see Susan was trying to calm down.

“Sorry. I guess I reacted like I would if my mom had said something like that.” She saw the look on Pearl’s face and quickly responded “Don’t worry, you are nothing like my mother. I guess I’ve gotten accustomed to people throwing me out of a living space.” Susan’s face took on a numbness at the thought.

“Oh goodness, I can’t imagine how hard that is.” Pearl reached to caress Susan’s hair this time hoping to reassure her further. “You can stay here as long as you want, forever if needed. I always wanted a family and my own home. You girls are the family I always wanted. I only thought about how much your parents are missing by not seeing you or Rachel.”

Rachel could sense her mother’s sadness and crawled between Pearl and Susan. She took her thumb out of her mouth and began to pat her mom’s leg. Susan and Pearl laughed at Rachel. The dog kissed Rachel’s nose and soon there was a love and laughter fest happening on the couch. Susan still hurt inside though. Susan knew that Pearl was right, but she was afraid to contact her parents. They wouldn’t understand

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that she and Rachel were living in a trailer. They would see it as another way that Susan had failed in her life goals. It wasn’t exactly what she

planned but she felt at home in a way she had never felt at home before.

Pearl stood up and stretched.

“I need to feed Jack. Do the humans have any requests for food?”

“Macawoni,” Rachel offered.

“Macawoni it is,” laughed Pearl.

She fed the dog and started the water for the macaroni. As she walked around the kitchen, she realized she still had her coat on from walking in the house. She asked Susan to watch the water on the stove while she took her coat back to her room and put her bag back there too.

She had to get her uniform washed before morning too.

While Pearl quickly put her things away, Jack ran back and forth between her and the girls. She could hear that Rachel was playing chase with him. When she started down the hall to the kitchen, the puppy scampered towards her, then turned around and ran back to Rachel.

He ran a circle around the child, which prompted peals of laughter, then ran back down the hall to Pearl. Pearl wondered how big he would get. He wouldn't have much room to run in the trailer if he got too big. Jack and Rachel played while the two women pulled together a quick meal of macaroni and fish sticks.

The three of them sat down to eat and helped Rachel practice with

a prayer she was learning at day care before meals.

*Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest, and let thy gifts to us be blessed. Amen.*

Susan knew the prayer, but Rachel mumbled along trying to get the words. Her sincerity was pure and innocent though. Pearl wondered how to help Rachel understand the prayer. There was a knock on the door and Jack started barking.

“Good puppy,” Pearl started to the door and picked Jack up who wiggled in happiness. She opened the door to an older man standing there.

“Evenin’ ladies. I’m Mr. Covington and my grandson said some lady from this house wanted to ask my wife a question.”

“Come on in Mr. Covington,” Pearl opened the door wider, glad to meet a neighbor.

“Hate to interrupt your supper.” He took his hat off and held it in both hands while standing just inside the door.

“Sit down and have a bite. It’s not much.” Pearl offered.

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“We already done et, but thank ye.”

“Are you afraid of dogs?” Pearl wanted to put Jack down. He was wiggling so, she was afraid she was going to drop him.

“Naw. I raised ma deddy’s hounds.” He petted Jack’s head and chuckled. “He’s a cute ‘un. He’s gonna be big.”

“I thought that myself.” Pearl put her hands on her hips as she looked at the dog. “I’m Pearl. Would you like a glass of tea?”

“Naw. It keeps me awake. Just wanted to answer the lady’s question so Antonio will go to bed. Me an’ his grandmaw always make him go to bed early on Sunday.”

“Susan, you said you talked to the boy.”

“Yes, Mr. Covington, I’m Susan and this is my daughter, Rachel.”

Susan stood to greet him. Rachel was eating her macaroni by hand, but she smiled at him. “I didn’t come over because Pearl pointed out that Antonio would be in school during the time we needed his help.”

“Well, maybe I can hep ye. Me ‘n my wife are retired. We’re here most ever day.”

“That would be too much to ask.”

“How do ye know if ye ain’t asked?” He smiled and then squatted to play with the puppy.

“We work at Joe’s Café and need someone to take my dog out mid-day so he can learn not to go on the porch.” Pearl spoke tentatively. “I could pay you for it.”

“You work at Joe’s?” Mr. Covington looked up interested.



“Yes. I’m the cook and she’s a waitress there. It’s hard to get off at lunch because that’s our busiest time.”

“I shore could do that for you.” Mr. Covington stood up slow and stiff. “I cain’t afford no dog and I miss ‘em. What would I need ta do?”

“I’ve made him a place on the porch so you could just take his leash and walk him at noon or one.” Pearl started to walk to the back porch with Jack underfoot. Susan hopped up so fast she jarred the table.

“I’ll show you Mr. Covington. Pearl you grab Jack so he won’t trip Mr. Covington.”

The old man carefully walked from the front door to the back. As he passed Rachel’s high chair he patted her head with his hat and winked at her. Rachel smiled at him and offered him a fish stick loaded with ketchup. He laughed gently and said to Rachel,

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“Thank ye, but I already had my supper.” He then leaned his head out the back door while Susan held the door open. Pearl was a little annoyed that Susan took over, but she knew she was trying to help.

“I reckon that all is easy enough.” Mr. Covington started back to the front door but stopped at Rachel’s chair long enough to tap her nose in delight while she sucked the ketchup off the last fish stick. He

carefully moved out of the way to avoid Rachel's messy hands when she reached for him. He stopped beside the door and asked, "I can start tomorrie if ye want me to."

"That would be great," Pearl sighed in relief "like I said, we'll pay you."

"No need to do that. I would take some leftovers from the Café as payment. I hear tell the cook there is a mighty fine cook." He grinned big and put his hat on snugly.

"I certainly can do that for you." Pearl was smiling too, proud that she was getting a reputation as a good cook. "Have a good evening."

"Night."

"Tell Antonio thanks for relaying my message," Susan said.

The old man just nodded his head and waved as he left the house.

"How about that?" Pearl exclaimed. She looked at Susan and could tell she was pleased too. She also looked like she had something up her sleeve.

"Come here Pearl. I want to show you something." Susan walked back out onto the porch. Pearl picked Jack up to make sure the panels wouldn't fall on him if he ran. When Pearl stepped on the porch, she couldn't believe her eyes. Susan had made her back porch into a delightful place. She had even put down linoleum over the slats so that

it was warmer for Jack and prettier for Pearl. Pearl put Jack on the floor and let him sniff.

“When did you do this?”

“Last night when Rachel went to bed, I didn’t know what to do with myself. Thought I would do something to help you for a change.”

Susan’s eyes were lit with joy.

“I don’t know what to say. It’s beautiful really. Where did you learn to do such work?”

“I always helped my father in his workshop. He’s good at this kind of thing.”

“You must be a chip off the old block,” Pearl hugged Susan in delight. “Thank you. This was such a big help.” They stood there

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watching Jack sniff and approve the place. He was happy with his dog corner, went into his house and then back out. It looked like he was saying thank you to both of them as he wagged his stubby tail.

“Try out your table and chair,” Susan offered.

“Oh, flowers!” Pearl was surprised at the pot of pansies on the table. “Is this one of Maddie’s pots?”

“Yes. I had asked her for one the other week not knowing we, I

mean you, were getting a dog.” Susan could tell that Pearl was pleased. Rachel began to make a fuss because she was being left out. “Coming baby. That’s all right.” Susan’s voice was muted as she went to Rachel but Pearl could hear her say “We’re showing Jack his new home and Pearl her new porch.” Susan walked back with Rachel in her arms. Rachel watched Jack and laughed. When she looked to Pearl, she pointed “Flowers.”

“That’s right baby. Time for spring and flowers.” Susan hugged Rachel tighter in approval. “Time to give you a bath, little girl.” Susan turned to Pearl before going back in the trailer “I’m really glad you like it.”

“I love it. Thank you again.” Pearl watched as the girls went in and was happy to see that Jack settled in his doghouse. The porch was warm enough that she didn’t think Jack would need a lamp. She stood and walked to the door to close it. She wanted to see how cold it was with the house door closed. It was chillier. She decided to turn the lamp on in case it got colder as the night progressed. Besides she thought, it will help him feel more secure during his first night on the porch. She locked the porch door so no one could steal him, and then went inside. She quietly locked the back door trying not to wake him. She stood at the back door for a moment and then went to her

bedroom.

She was glad they had used paper plates so she could be quiet as she cleaned the table. She could hear the girls laughing in the back. Jack must have been dead tired from his big day of playing and meeting the horse because he didn't whine once. She put the forks and spoons in some water to soak overnight, then washed the ketchup and crumbs off the table. After she had swept, she turned the kitchen lights off and listened once more for Jack. She tried peeping through the curtains to see if she could see him, but she couldn't. He was still asleep in his house. She walked down the hall to the washer and put her uniform

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into the dryer. She would have to remember to get up earlier so she could iron it before work. As she settled into bed, Pearl was full of wonder at how her life was growing.

Jack awoke at four in the morning and started howling. It scared Pearl so bad she almost broke a toe getting out of bed. When she opened the door, Jack stood on his hind legs reaching up for her like the baby he was. Pearl looked around the back yard to see if someone had come up or if a deer had wandered up. She couldn't see or hear anything.

“Poor baby. Did you wake up and mommy was gone?” Pearl hugged him close as she turned out the heat lamp. She looked around the back yard one more time and there was nothing. “You’re just afraid. Come on in with me.” She went back into the house and locked the door. She didn’t want to turn a light on yet and hoped Jack didn’t wake Rachel. She paused in the hall to listen if anything came from Susan’s door. There was not a sound. Jack started to whimper. “Shh Jack. It’s okay.” She took him back to her room and closed the door. “I was having a bad dream myself. You stay here while I get my uniform.” He started whimpering again before she could open the door to the bedroom, so she sat down on the floor with him. Monday was going to be a long day.

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## 28 CHANGES

Susan and Rachel had dressed and started towards the kitchen for breakfast. The kitchen was still dark, which was unusual. Pearl was always the first up, humming as she worked. Susan put Rachel in the booster and gave her some cereal. She didn’t hear Pearl. She looked on the back porch and she didn’t see Jack either. Once she got to Pearl’s bedroom, she knocked lightly on the door. There was no answer.

Scared now, Susan opened the door, speaking Pearl's name. She smiled as she saw Pearl asleep on the floor curled up with the dog. She softly shook Pearl. At the motion, Jack jumped up all over both of them.

"Lordy, I fell back asleep. Will you take Jack out while I get ready?"

"Sure. I'm going to have to get Rachel on to the day care. We're all running behind today." She started down the hall to get Jack before he had an accident. He had run down the hall to see if Rachel would drop cereal for him. Susan tried not to chuckle at Pearl's disheveled hair. She had never seen Pearl like this. "Come on Jack, let's go outside."

"Tell Joe I'll be there as soon as I can. I got to iron my uniform."

Pearl yelled down the hall.

"Will do." Susan hurried the dog out the back door. Luckily, he went fast and she could get back on the porch. She didn't like to be that far away from Rachel when Pearl wasn't watching her. She peeked in the door to make sure Rachel was okay and then fed the dog. She gave him a fresh bowl of water and locked the door while food distracted him. She packed Rachel into her coat and toboggan, and then grabbed her own coat. "We're gone!" She was tickled that she had her own car back.

Pearl was mumbling and stumbling as she rushed to get ready. She wished she hadn't fallen asleep again. Not only did it make her

groggier, but she also had a bad dream about Sam. In the dream, Sam decided never to speak to her again. Then Susan and Rachel had left too. Pearl was glad that Susan was gone so she wouldn't have to talk to her. She wasn't about to go to work with a wrinkled uniform either.

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§

By the time Pearl got to work Polly and Susan were there still waiting in their cars. There was no sign of Joe or his car. They had fifteen minutes to get the grill going and the tables set up. The women got out of their cars after Pearl opened her truck door.

"Where's Joe?" Pearl fumbled with her keys.

"Have no idea," Polly grumbled. She was not a morning person.

"I'm worried, Pearl."

"Me too, Susan. He didn't call the house before I left either."

Pearl jiggled the old lock trying to get it to open. She had the second key that didn't work as well as the master. A customer drove up while she was unlocking the door. She pulled the door open for Polly and Susan and saw that the customer was only Beau.

"We're running a little late Beau. You'll have to be patient with us."

"No problem. Can I help?"



“Do you know where Joe lives?”

“Sure do. Why?”

“He’s supposed to be here already and he’s not. He didn’t call me either. Can you go check on him?”

“You bet.” Beau hurried back to his car.

Beau was a crazy old coot but he was dependable and honest. She hoped Joe was okay. She had to get breakfast started since it was clear that Joe was late like the rest of them.

Susan and Polly turned on the lights, the grill, and then began to set out the jelly and butter on the tables. Pearl found the extra register key that was with her door key. She was glad that Joe had thought to do that. She turned the register on and made sure there was some change in the drawer. She was so addled on Saturday, she couldn’t remember. Pearl began taking charge.

“Susan, can you run this register till Joe gets in?”

“Yes, I can.”

“You’re in charge of it then. If there’s time, show Polly how to use it.”

“I don’t want to run no register. I’d rather clean tables.”

“Fine by me if it’s okay with Susan.”

“Heck I don’t mind running the register. I like the challenge.”

“It’s all yours then.”

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“Pearl, do you think we should call Josh?”

“Not until we know if Joe is okay. I’m hoping he’s had a Monday like the rest of us.”

“Monday, Monday can’t trust that day...” Susan began singing.

Polly groaned. She hated cheerful people in the morning. Pearl laughed as she put on her apron to start the hash browns.

§

Beau drove as fast as he could without being dangerous. It wasn’t like Joe to be late in the morning. Heck, he didn’t even remember Joe missing work. He pulled into Joe’s long, gravel driveway. Joe needed to put some fill dirt on the drive, Beau thought. His Gran Torino was low to the ground meaning that Beau had to go slow at some of the dips in the road so the road wouldn’t scrub the bottom of the car. He could see from the road that there were lights on in the house and that Joe’s van was still parked there. He hoped there wasn’t a robber. Beau didn’t carry guns. He pulled behind Joe’s van and jammed the car into park.

He went to the back-screen door and knocked. When he tried it, it

was unlocked so he stepped on to the porch. The back door was locked but had windows. Beau knocked while he was looking in and calling Joe's name. He tried the front door and it was locked. He looked one more time and couldn't see anything. Beau went to the front porch hoping Joe had a doorbell. There wasn't a doorbell that worked. The low windows weren't covered so he stepped to look into the house and prayed that Joe didn't shoot him. He knew Joe kept guns and was a hunter.

He could see Joe on the floor at the bottom of the steps. This wasn't good. Beau didn't want to break the window with his hand. He ran to get a hammer out of his trunk to break the window to the back door. He was worried more because he didn't know CPR if Joe was having a heart attack. He popped the trunk, grabbed the hammer, and ran to the door. He covered his face and broke the glass out so he could unlock the door. Beau removed the glass edges before reaching in to unlock and open the door.

He stooped down to Joe and called to him. He knew enough not to move him. Joe mumbled something. Beau put his hand on his

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shoulder so Joe would know someone was there. "Joe, it's Beau. What

happened?” Joe tried to open his eyes then mumbled.

“Fell.”

“I’ll call an ambulance.” Beau was afraid he fell down the stairs. He dialed 911 who directed him to cover Joe with a blanket. He grabbed an old afghan off the couch and then went back to Joe.

§

“Pearl, I’m going to call Josh.” Susan was harried but worried.

“Beau’s not back and that can’t be good. Josh has to drive all the way from Charlotte if he can get off work.”

“Call Joe’s house first. Beau should be there.”

“We should have done that first.” Susan dialed but there was no answer. She relayed this to Pearl. They both agreed it was time to call Josh. Susan called Josh and told him what they knew. He told them he was on his way. Pearl and Susan stared at one another for a moment after Susan hung up.

“Listen Susan, since we don’t know what’s happening we can’t tell the customers. Just say Joe is running late. Lord I hope he just had car trouble and Beau took him to the shop. I wish Beau would’ve called us.”

§

The ambulance seemed to take forever to get to Joe’s house. Beau

didn't know what to do but pray. He didn't pray aloud. He wasn't that type of Christian, though he would pray if you asked him to pray aloud. It felt weird to him to pray aloud over Joe even though it appeared Joe had passed out. Beau was sitting on the bottom of the stairs near Joe so he could be near if Joe spoke. He had pulled Joe's blinds all the way open so he could also watch for the ambulance. The window beside the front door had a view all the way down the drive. Finally, he saw the ambulance turn in. He went out on the porch to wave them to the front.

The EMT woman asked him all kinds of questions, but he didn't know the answers. He told the story of why he was there. The woman asked about next of kin and that scared Beau, but the woman promised it was only procedure. He told them to wait for Joe's son who was

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hopefully on his way from Charlotte. Joe didn't awaken while the EMTs worked on him so when the ambulance drove away; Beau only knew that Joe was on his way to the hospital, but no more. Still, he thought he needed to call Pearl and let the café know.

Susan answered, but called Pearl to the phone. She only felt it right that Pearl should be the one talking to Beau. She had known them all

the years. She was worried for Josh. She tried to keep the worry off her face so the customers wouldn't guess, but they were aware that something was wrong. The early customers were Joe's friends and the community regulars. Several customers turned around in their booths trying to hear Pearl's conversation. Everyone could tell it was serious though only hear Pearl's side of it.

"Thanks for calling, Beau."

"Yes, Susan called Josh. If you will, stay there until we know if Josh is coming here or there. We'll call each other once Josh has arrived."

"Um-hm. You don't worry about that Beau. Thanks for going out there. We owe you some meals."

"Okay. Bye." Pearl hung up and stared at the phone for a moment until she realized how quiet the dining room was. She turned to them wondering if she should say anything. Bill nodded his head, encouraging her.

"Everybody, I know you all know Joe so I'm going to tell you what I know. Please don't add to the story. Beau found Joe on the floor."

She paused and decided to omit the news about the stairs because someone would make it into something it was not. "The ambulance just took him to the hospital. We don't know what's wrong. Josh is on his way to be with his dad. For those of you who pray, hope you'll put

Joe on your church prayer list.” Pearl was wringing her hands as she talked.

She had known Joe all her life as an acquaintance, but he had become dear to her since he gave her a job. She stood there dazed while the others absorbed the news in relative quiet.

Old Bill spoke up,

“He’ll be awright I’m sure. That ole cuss ain’t gonna let no doctor hol’ him down.”

Several customers nodded their head in agreement.

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Pearl nodded along with them. She didn’t know if he would be all right, but she agreed he was a fighter. There was nothing they could do right now anyway. Pearl turned and went back to the kitchen to work. Her heart was heavy and she was tired from a weekend that was over emotional.

Josh arrived an hour later. He had been caught in Charlotte work traffic. He was frenzied by the time he came in. Susan led him to a booth and filled him in on what they knew, which wasn’t much. Pearl came out of the kitchen to talk to him and make sure he had calmed down. Polly told Josh how to get to the new section of the hospital

while Pearl called to let Beau know he could lock up Joe's house. Josh looked at Susan asking if she could go with him, but she was needed at the café. Customers who knew Josh spoke to him, shook his hand, or hugged him before he left. He promised to call Pearl as soon as he knew anything.

§

Maddie had errands to run near lunch and decided to stop by Pearl's to see if Jack was okay. Pearl never called to ask for help, but it was like Pearl to avoid calling after such a weekend. Maddie had always sworn Pearl's pride was going to kill her. She parked her Jeep in front of Pearl's trailer and went to the back where Pearl hid her extra key. There was an old man coming down the porch with Jack on a leash. He held tight to the rail and to the leash as he walked down the stairs. When he saw Maddie, he startled.

"Howdy," Maddie said. "Didn't mean to scare you."

"Dat's okay. Jus' heppin' Miss Pearl with her pup here." The old man started on his walk, ignoring Maddie's presence.

"I'm Maddie." She proffered her hand.

"I'm Mr. Covington and this here's Jack." He shook Maddie's hand and then laughed at the puppy fighting the end of the leash. "Looks like he ain't too good on da leash yet."



“No, she just adopted him on Friday.”

“You know Miss Pearl?” The old man looked up at Maddie and smiled. He was shorter than Maddie, but seemed tall in some way.

“Sure do. She’s my oldest friend.” Maddie walked with them and stopped when they stopped.

“Bet she ain’t older ‘n me.”

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“How old are you?” Maddie could tell the old man wanted her to ask.

“Eighty-nine ‘n’ countin’. Dat dere old woman over yunder is ma wife. She be eighty-seven next month.”

“Do tell. I’ll have to talk to Pearl about baking a cake for her.”

“I hear tell she’s a good cook. That’d be mighty nice of ye. I gotta get the dog back. Nice meetin’ ye Miss Maddie.”

“Nice meeting you too Mr. Covington.” She watched him toddle back to Pearl’s house, turned, and waved at Mrs. Covington who had been watching them. Then she got in her Jeep to leave. She was glad Pearl found a new friend in a neighbor. She was starting to come out of her shell and it was a beautiful thing for Maddie to see.

She turned on the radio as she waited for traffic to clear enough for

her to turn right to go back towards Pleasant Quarry. Where were all these people coming from on a Monday? She looked at her watch and noticed she was out while folks were trying to get to work. She was in no hurry. That was the advantage of being a potter. She was beating on her steering wheel to a song on the radio when a BMW drove by. The driver looked like that woman she had met in Charlotte, Leah. Her body felt like a magnet drawn to the person in the car. The thought crossed her mind to follow the car, but there was no way that woman would be out here in the middle of nowhere. Besides, Maddie wasn't a stalker. She finally pulled out to go to the library and then the post office.

Maddie continued to think about Leah when Dave Matthews' new song, Crash Into Me, began to play.

*Sweet you rock and sweet you roll, Lost for you I'm so lost for you. You come crash*

*into me and I come into you, I come into you.*

Maddie loved the sexy words of the song and the way the tune expressed how her body responded to Leah the moment she met her. She decided to drive through the country and listen to the rest of the song while daydreaming of Leah. She turned the radio up louder to hear the lyrics over the noise of her Jeep.

*I'm bare-boned and crazy for you. When you come, crash into me, baby And I come into you.*

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The song thrummed through Maddie's veins. She shifted gears as she turned down Cold Springs Road. She shifted higher as the throb of Matthews' lyrics matched the blood rushing through her body.

*Oh, and you come crash into me, baby And I come into you Hike up your skirt a little more and show the world to me Hike up your skirt a little more and show your world to me in a boy's dream... In a boy's dream*

*Oh, I watch you there through the window and I stare at you. You wear nothing but you wear it so well. Tied up and twisted, the way I'd like to be for you, for me,*

*come crash into me.*

By the time the song ended, Maddie saw that she had gradually sped up to sixty. She was glad the deputies were not out this morning. She slowed down to enjoy the ride. Her body was humming to the rhythm of the road. She turned the radio off to stay with the feeling of the music, the memory of Leah's presence and the sensual feelings flowing through her body. The song continued in her head as she took the curves and the Jeep flowed over the hills. A flock of Canada geese took

to flight through the sky and across a field as she turned towards Concord. She had no worries, no cares, only feelings for the love of a woman. She was dreaming of a woman.

When her feelings finally ebbed, she had driven nine miles from where she started. She was close enough to Concord that she might as well pick up a few groceries at the Food Lion on Branchview. She left the radio off so she could think more about Leah. She knew she was dreaming an unrealistic dream. That is, unless she could convince Jonnie to have PJ get Leah's number. What a long shot that was. She pulled into Food Lion's parking lot, put the Jeep in first, and pulled up hard on the brake. Heck, she didn't need the trouble of a woman anyway.

As she grabbed a grocery cart she tried to remember what she needed at the house. She liked to make lists before shopping but today she would have to go with the flow. It must be a go with the flow type of day. She smiled at the thought, and then remembered she was in a public place. She had gone down the pasta aisle when she remembered she was out of coffee. She turned away from her cart so fast she bumped into the woman behind her. Both women started apologizing as they picked up the items on the floor. When Maddie stood up to

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her full height, she had to blink. Standing before her was Leah, or was

it? The woman looked stunned.

“Are you okay?” Maddie asked unsure.

“Sure. Are you Maddie? I’m Leah, remember me?” When she reached out her hand she dropped a container of frosting. She left it there.

“Of course, I remember you.” Maddie reminded herself to breathe and stay calm.

“I lost your phone number and missed your house thingy, uh blessing. I’m so sorry and I’ve been so busy I’ve not had time to call PJ for your number again.” Leah was nervous as a cat, more nervous than Ms. Cookies had ever been.

“It’s okay.” Maddie picked up the container of frosting and placed it lightly on Leah’s stack of items. “What are you doing here? I thought you lived in Charlotte.”

“I did, but I moved here. Well, close to here. I really want to talk but I’ve got to get to an audition and then get to a class. Call me,” she said as she ran away.

Maddie tried to walk fast to follow her. She didn’t want to be seen chasing a woman through Food Lion. Darn how did she get out so fast? She saw her at the speed check lane and rushed to her side. “Leah, I don’t have your number.”

“Um, okay. Thought I had given it to you.” Leah flushed at the

number. She waited for some rude comment from Maddie because a lot of lesbians got a kick out of it. She needed to change it, but it was easy to remember. Maddie only wrote it down hoping she wouldn't lose it this time.

"Got it. Good luck with your audition."

"Thanks," Leah waved as she grabbed her bags and ran out of the store.

Maddie watched her run out. She was wearing high heels. What great legs. Maddie turned back to get her cart trying not to kiss the paper in her hand with Leah's number on it. The Dave Matthews song played in her head for the rest of her shopping trip.

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When Leah got to her car, she was so flustered by the encounter with Maddie that she couldn't remember where she was or where she needed to go. She turned the radio to WDAV in hopes some nice classical piece would play to help calm her down. She was going to be late if she didn't get going. She pulled out the town map along with the directions she had written down. Concord couldn't be any more complicated than Charlotte. She was excited to be auditioning as a

pianist for the play for The Old Courthouse Theatre, called “Picnic.”

She had to calm down. She finally found Spring Street on her map and it seemed close.

As she drove to the theatre, she wondered what Maddie was doing at the grocery store so early. Of course, she must live nearby. How exciting if Maddie lived in Concord and she lived in Pleasant Quarry.

She had to live close to be at the grocery this early. Damn. What was she going to do about Kat? Were they really dating? Not really...though she figured sex probably counted. She shouted out “Damn, damn, damn why do I let my body lead me astray?”

The drive to the courthouse was only five minutes from the store.

That would mean a fifteen-minute drive from her house. She was starting to love the small-town life, or at least she loved the small-town traffic. She heard the locals complain, but the traffic was nothing compared to Charlotte rush hour. She arrived five minutes earlier than the audition. She walked up to the old building after parking but the doors were locked. While she waited in her car, she dreamed of Maddie and wondered if she had stopped smoking. The chemistry between them always smoked. What was she going to do about Kat?

After her audition, Leah was giddy. What a great Monday. She was told she was the best pianist yet. To make her day better, she still had



plenty of time to get to the college to substitute for Dr. Beuchner's Baroque Music class. She had driven only a few miles when her gas light came on and she pulled into a gas station. She had used her cash at the Food Lion. She would have to use her credit card for the gas. When she opened her wallet, her card was gone. She looked through her purse and was puzzled because it rarely fell out. She remembered ordering something on the phone and must have left it at home. She knew her BMW would make it home even with the gas light on. When she got to her apartment she looked all over the place and couldn't find her card. When was the last time she used it? She was concerned, but time was moving too quickly. She had to get on the

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road to class. This was the first time Dr. Beuchner had trusted her with one of his classes. She hoped to get on his good side so that she could be the accompanist for the touring choir. She looked around one more time and then got some cash from her secret stash. She was glad her dad had taught them to do this as kids.

§

As the lunch crowd came in it was clear that word had gotten around town. Everybody asked about Joe. Even some locals who

hadn't been in for a time came in to check on Joe. There had been no word other than he was in a private room and that Josh was with him. Pearl didn't think Josh would call during the lunch rush. He had helped his dad bus tables ever since he was ten, so he knew how busy it was at lunch. People were concerned of course, but they wanted their lunch. Most places only closed if the owner or a long-time waitress died. Polly, Pearl, and Susan didn't realize how much it helped that Joe took care of the register. It was one more thing to add to their list of things to do and rush. When Joe got better, Pearl was going to have to talk to him about hiring another person.

Susan was worried about Josh. After spending time with the men on Sunday, she had a new appreciation for a healthy father and son relationship. She had never been around a relationship like these two men shared. She admired Joe even more than she had before. She tried to pray for Joe and Josh between orders, but mostly she wished for the day to be over. She was glad she had driven her own car so she could go pick up Rachel and then go to the hospital. She knew Pearl would go straight to the hospital.

Polly tried to be more patient with the customers than usual. She loved Joe as much as she could, but she didn't love many people and even then, she loved not so much. She loved her cats and her dear,

deceased husband. Her good for nothing daughter she could do without. She was rougher than Pearl or Susan and everybody knew it. Most of the locals accepted her for who she was, but the new customers often complained that she was rude. She couldn't wait for the day to be over. Her mama always told her to stop wishing her life away, but she was tired of being nice to people. She just wanted to go home and watch Jeopardy.

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Near the end of the day Sam came in and Pearl felt her presence before she saw her. She didn't have the time or energy for this today. She looked up shortly after Sam entered the cafe. Pearl then went back to frying some onion rings. While some hamburgers cooked on the grill, she wrote a note to go with Sam's order and then called Susan to the window.

"Susan, give this note to the customer over there." She pointed at Sam. "It's an old friend and I don't have time to talk right now." She immediately turned back to the grill. She didn't want Susan to see that she was embarrassed. As she flipped the burger she chided herself for acting like a silly teenager.

Susan delivered the order and the note with her usual efficiency.

She didn't have time to wonder what was going on and she was still preoccupied with her own thoughts. Sam was nervous to read the note but wanted to read it before she ate in case she lost her appetite. She breathed relief after reading,

*Sam,*

*I thought about what you said. Can't talk today. Joe's in the hospital.*

*Hope you'll come back another day.*

*Pearl*

Sam lifted her head to peer into the kitchen. She waited patiently until Pearl looked up and nodded her head okay. Pearl smiled and Sam's heart burst open wide.

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## 29 PULL TOGETHER

As soon as Pearl closed the café, she hurried over to the hospital. She found a parking space, checked her hair to make sure she didn't look like a witch, got out of the car, and locked it. As she walked to the front of the hospital, she straightened her skirt and hoped she didn't smell like a walking french fry. Dang it, she hated hospitals. She was self-conscious about every movement. Her parents did not live long enough to visit in the hospital and her grandma had died at home.

Heck, Pearl wasn't even born in a hospital. She could feel her heart beating hard as she approached the front desk.

"I'm here to see Joe Stallard."

"Just a moment." The prim woman looked at her computer, then wrote down a number on a card. "He's in 319."

"Thank you." Pearl walked further into the hospital but did not have a clue where she was going. How hard could it be to find a hospital room? Several mazes and nurses' stations later, she found the right area. She hoped she never had to come to the hospital again.

What a confusing mess. She wondered if she could find her way back out to her car.

When she approached the room, she paused at the closed door.

Praying that Joe was okay and that she would know what to say or keep her mouth shut, she knocked lightly and heard a voice. She eased the door open a little bit to be able to announce her entry. Josh pulled the door open and welcomed her. He whispered as he talked.

"Come on in. He's sedated right now."

"I'll come back later."

"No come on in. He should be waking up any minute."

The two of them took seats by the window. Both looked at Joe's face expectantly.

“Did they find out what’s wrong?”

“Yeah. He fell last week and didn’t tell anyone about it. During the fall, he fractured a bone and evidently walking on it all day at the café made it worse. The fall when he passed out at the house didn’t help it.

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They’ve taken an x-ray and are supposed to come back later and talk about it. He was in a lot of pain when he finally came to.”

“He said his leg had been hurting but I just figured it was because he was getting older.”

“Me too. The stubborn cuss should have told someone he had fallen. He’ll be pissed when he finds out he has to stay in the hospital for a couple of days. I dread it. He can be a pain when he is sick.”

“We’ll back you up. I’m not afraid to stand up to him.”

“So I hear.” Josh laughed but Pearl could see he was worried.

They sat in silence for a few minutes when Joe began to wake. Josh stood up quickly.

“Dad, it’s Josh. Pearl’s here too.”

“Where am I?” He rubbed his hand over his face trying to shake the grogginess.

“Still in the hospital.”

“What for?” Joe became irritated. He tried to sit up and winced. He lay back down on the bed.

“You’re still waiting for the doc to return and tell us what’s going on with your leg. They’re pretty sure it was fractured. Remember?”

“I remember now. What’s taking so long?”

“Dad you’re not the only person in the hospital. Do you want some water?”

Joe shook his head. “Did you say Pearl is here?”

“Here I am, Joe.” Pearl stepped up beside Josh so that Joe could see her. “Wanted to check in and make sure you were still kicking.”

“Looks like I won’t be at work tomorrow. Can you handle it?” He was gruff and could not meet Pearl’s eyes.

“Of course, we’re going to handle it. We need you to get well.” She wanted to fuss at him because now she was mad at him for worrying her so much and not going to a doctor. She would hate to be Joe’s wife.

“Fine. I’ll be back as soon as I get out of here.” He kept his head turned away.

Both Josh and Pearl were confused. Josh shrugged his shoulders indicating to Pearl that he didn’t know what was going on with his dad either.

“Guess I’ll mosey on home then. Let me know if you need anything.” Pearl tried catching Joe’s eye but it was clear he had fallen asleep again. Josh walked her to the door. When they stepped out of

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the room, Pearl hugged Josh tight. As she released the embrace, she put her hands on his shoulders and made sure he was looking at her. “You call me at any time you need me, you hear? You are like a son to me. I’ll do anything I can for you or Joe.” He nodded that he would follow her orders. She put her purse on her left arm and patted Josh’s face “He’ll be okay I’m sure.”

“I hope so.” Josh kissed her cheek and went back to his dad’s side. As Pearl walked away, she wondered how long she could run the café without Joe by her side.

§

When Pearl finally got home Susan and Rachel were playing with Antonio and Jack in the front yard. Some other day she would join in the play but the fatigue was hitting her hard. Too much had happened too fast. She was dragging from her car to the door when she heard Mr. Covington call Antonio to supper. As Antonio left, Jack saw that Pearl was going inside and raced to beat her.



In his happiness at her return, he got underfoot and she stepped on his paw. He yelped as though he was dying. She got down on the floor to console him. While she was there on the floor, she decided to let him console her too. There were puppy kisses interspersed with puppy twirls. Soon he had her smiling. She was too tired to laugh. She could hear Susan telling Rachel about supper as the two walked into the living room.

“How’s Joe?”

“He’s at least alive. They think it’s some kind of fracture. Josh was waiting for the doctor. Since Joe was asleep I decided to come on home.”

“I figured you would be tired when you came home so we tried to tire the puppy out for you.”

“I am grateful for that for sure.” Jack sat down beside Pearl, wagging his tail, and listening to the conversation. “How’s Miss Rachel?” Pearl asked in a singsong voice.

“Meemaw.” Rachel fell on Pearl’s neck and hugged her tight, then kissed her on the cheek. Rachel hung on to Pearl’s neck. “You okay?” Rachel patted Pearl’s cheek while she spoke “Did the doctor hurt you?”

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“Doctor?” Pearl didn’t think she could explain one more problem.

“I wasn’t sure how to explain hospital to her until we get there.”

“Oh.” Pearl was partly relieved. “You know they don’t allow children up on the floors, don’t you?”

“Sure.” Susan blushed “Josh and I made arrangements to meet in the hospital café at six for dinner.”

“Do tell.” Pearl smiled and teased “What a romantic date.”

“I know, right? You do what you have to when there’s a child involved. I’m going to go give her a bath and see if she can nap before we go.” Susan pulled Rachel away from Pearl acting as if she was going to play a game with the child.

“I’ll probably be asleep with the puppy before you’re gone.”

“Okay.” Susan walked with Rachel coaxing her down the hall towards their end of the trailer.

“Come on, Jack. Looks like it’s just you and me tonight.” She fed him then went to take a shower.

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Pearl laid down and fell asleep on the bed catty cornered after her shower. She knew the dog had found a way up on the bed, she could feel him tromping around. She was too tired to reprimand him. An

hour later, she heard the girls leave the trailer. She thought about getting under the covers and going to bed for the night, but the puppy was wide awake. He was bouncing all over her and biting playfully at her hair. His whiskers tickled her neck. She finally rolled over and picked him up to hold him away from her. He was getting heavy fast. She wouldn't be able to pick him up like that much longer. She put him down on the floor.

"Looks like we have a few hours to ourselves Jack. What should we do?"

He raced down to the kitchen and back to her. He practiced his play stance movement in hopes she would get on the floor and play. She padded down the hall in her bare feet. "Where's your ball, Jack?" He looked around confused. She saw the ball on the back porch and threw it down the hall. They played chase for five minutes before Jack tired of the game. Pearl put the ball back on the porch and got Jack some fresh water. He lapped it up but also dribbled it across the kitchen floor. "You're making a mess, little boy. What are we going to

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do when you're bigger?" She grabbed an old towel and put it under his bowl.

After washing her hands, she made a sandwich and poured a Coke.

As much as she loved the girls, she was glad to have some quiet time with Jack. He sat quietly at her feet while she ate her sandwich. The girls were not loud at all, but they still seemed to take up a lot of space...a lot of energy too. She sighed deeply. Jack sat up expectantly and she wondered if someone was feeding him from the table. She would have to put a stop to that. She didn't want her dog begging at the table. She decided to see if she had any moon pies in her cabinet.

As she stood up, the phone rang.

She was too tired to talk and she hated the phone. She figured the person would call back or leave a message. As she searched the cabinet for something sweet, the answering machine clicked. There was a pause and then the caller started,

"Pearl. This is Sam. I uh..."

Pearl almost fell as she raced to reach for the phone.

"Hey. This is me."

"Pearl?"

"Yes. This is Pearl." God, she thought she was going to have a heart attack. "How did you get my number?"

"You're in the phone book. I waited till we met again before calling.

Didn't want to scare you or for you to think I'm a stalker."

“I am. Sorry. I only get calls from Maddie or Joe.” She didn’t know what to say at this point and neither did Sam. There was awkward breathing on the phone but it wasn’t sexy, only nervous.

“It’s been so long. It was a miracle that I happened to stop at that café for a change. I’ve been driving past there for two years. I wish I had known. I was sure you would have moved away with someone else.” Sam’s voice was filled with regret.

“I’ve not been working there that long.” Pearl felt shy and vulnerable.

“It’s good to hear your voice. I wanted to try and call because I think your boss is getting mad at me for trying to contact you at work.”

“He’s a curmudgeon, ignore him. I am always busy at work though.”

“That’s another reason I called. I’m hoping you consider going out with me next weekend.”

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“I work on weekends.” Pearl’s head was swirling with too much information, too many memories, and her heart was overwhelmed with emotion. She knew she was holding her breath.

“Don’t you have any days off?” Sam asked hopefully.

“Sundays.”

“What about the Sunday after next? That will give you seven days to decide.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Please do Pearl. I need to talk to you, to see you.” Sam paused, waiting for Pearl to respond in the same way but Pearl could not respond. “Take my number in case we can’t connect at the café.” After Sam hung up, Pearl stood holding the phone to her ear a bit longer with her hand on her heart. The sound of Jack peeing on the carpet was the only thing that made her come out of her daze. “No, Jack!” She immediately took him outside all the time cursing herself for not paying attention. It was her fault that he had an accident. He was a puppy after all and she knew after he had eaten and drank so much water there was a chance for an accident. When they had finished the walk, she put him on the porch while she cleaned up the mess. As she scrubbed the carpet, she began to go through all the things she had to do for the café tomorrow. She was nervous and excited to have the challenge of running things for a day or two. Jack started whining on the porch. “Just a minute, Jack.” She called to him kindly “I’m almost finished.”

After she had completed her tasks, she let Jack in from the porch

and quickly picked him up. She wanted to make sure he wouldn't mark that same area. "We need to get you to the vet. There's so many things to do I'm going to need a secretary." She sat down on the couch and kept Jack on her lap. He squirmed a little but then settled down. The two of them sat while Pearl made a mental list of all that needed to be done for the coming week. Soon, they were fast asleep.

§

Susan was home by eight fifteen. Rachel had fallen asleep on the way home. As she walked into the trailer, she smiled at the sight of Pearl curled up with the dog on the couch. It looked like both were dreaming. Susan took Rachel and put her to bed, then returned to see if she could pick Jack up without awakening Pearl.

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Jack was so sleepy he was limp. Pearl kept sleeping and she was usually a light sleeper. Susan tiptoed to get the leash from the back and took Jack out. He easily went to bed in his little dog house and the night was warm for February. Susan was sure he would be okay. She left the dog to sleep in the dark and tiptoed back to Pearl. She had covered Pearl with an afghan from the rocker and started to her own room before Pearl stirred.

“Susan?”

“Sorry. I tried not to wake you.” Susan whispered and walked back near Pearl.

“That’s sweet but I want to hear about Joe.” She sat up and turned on the lamp beside the couch. She pulled the afghan up over her shoulders as she sat back to listen.

“Are you sure you’re awake enough?” Pearl nodded yes and Susan continued. “It appears he had a stress fracture that worsened because he didn’t attend to it. When he fell yesterday, the tibia broke in two. He had passed out from pain it appears. They’ve put the bone back in place and put a cast on it. He’s on pain meds and will be in the hospital for another day or so to make sure he’s okay.”

“Did you get a chance to talk to him?” Pearl sat up straighter and was more alert.

“No. I didn’t feel comfortable asking Josh to keep Rachel while I went up to see him.”

“Maybe tomorrow I can keep her for you.”

“I might talk to Mrs. Covington to see if she would watch her while I go visit. It wouldn’t be for long and she is a kind woman. She makes sure that Antonio is a gentleman.” Susan lifted her eyebrows in approval of what she saw as good parenting.



“Perhaps we could go together then.” Once they settled that Pearl and Susan both went their ways to sleep. As Pearl walked down the hall, she realized she was afraid of going out with Sam because people might call her names.

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30 TIME TO HEAL

Her dreams started with memories of Sam’s first kiss. Then the dreams skipped as an old vinyl record might at a scratch. The song was different and the dream was filled with more memory. She tossed and turned trying to get out of the restraints that held her to the table. She felt the electricity surge through her body and screamed until she awakened. She was sweating and prayed she had not awakened Susan or Rachel. She could not, no would not, explain the dreams. There was no sound. She was so tired, but afraid to go back to sleep.

It had been twenty or more years since she had relived the horror in her dreams. She looked at the clock. The old clock ticked away the seconds loudly in the still of the night. At least she woke up only thirty minutes earlier than usual. She was tired but knew she had slept enough hours. Still, as she stood to put on her uniform, her body felt like lead. She remembered the puppy needed to walk. She grabbed a pair of

sweat pants and her flashlight and went to find Jack.

Jack was still sleepy but glad to see Pearl. He did a puppy stretch as Pearl put the leash on him. The morning was still dark even though there were utility lights in the trailer park. Pearl wasn't afraid of the dark. She was more afraid of the things that people see in the daytime. She had her flashlight for further comfort. Still, the dreams trailed her as she walked the dog. She spoke to him lightly wishing that their morning ritual would chase away the dregs of dark feelings. The sun could not rise fast enough to suit Pearl.

Inside the house, Pearl felt hot. Since the outside had not been cold, the inside felt like hell, or was that only her memories? She began her morning routine. Jack followed her as she moved. He seemed to be consoling her. She smiled down at him. "I'm okay, Jack. Just a bad old dream." She bent down to pet him and knew she was lying to the dog. Not that the dog cared. She wondered how to stop the dreams from returning. She turned on all the lights in the kitchen and the living room. After starting the coffee, she turned all the lights on in the hall to her room.

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By the time she returned to the kitchen, Rachel and Susan came in

to sit at the table. Pearl finished buttoning up her blouse as she walked into the kitchen. “Mornin’.”

“Morning. Are you okay?” Susan asked with a mouth full of cereal. She wondered what was up with all the lights on in the house.

“I’m fine.” Pearl spoke in a clipped manner “just tired.” She said nothing more as she poured a cup of coffee and took her first sip at the kitchen sink. She set her coffee cup down to get her box of Cheerios. Susan had already set a bowl out for her with a spoon. Pearl sat down with them and said “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” Susan looked at Pearl seeking to sense Pearl’s mood. She took a sip of coffee and decided to change the subject. “I don’t know how you work in those skirts.”

“They’re cooler in the kitchen.” Pearl’s expression was nondescript. She took a bite of cereal. Rachel looked to her mom and then to Pearl. Aware of the movement by the child, Pearl looked up “Good morning Miss Rachel.” Rachel smiled a big smile but Pearl’s smile was pitiful in response. Pearl could feel Susan looking at her. “Stop that, okay?”

“Okay.” Susan looked down at her cereal and ate the last of her Captain Crunch.

“I’m not myself today. Don’t take it personally.”

“I won’t. Do you need me to drive separately today?”

“Yes. I need to get a head start at the Café.” Pearl still could not make eye contact with Susan. “Thank you for caring enough to wonder.”

“You’re welcome.” Susan wanted to touch Pearl’s arm, but her intuition told her that would be the wrong thing to do. She turned to Rachel. “Ready to go to school, little girl?” Rachel nodded her head. Susan took the bowls and put them in the sink. Pearl could hear Susan and Rachel talking about how to best brush teeth. They were soon off without a sound. As they left, both waved goodbye to Pearl.

Pearl was grateful that Susan was not pushy or nosy. She sent up a prayer to God for help through the day. She finished her cereal and put her bowl in the sink. Jack was dancing at her feet. She took him out and was glad that all the neighbors were asleep. When she got back in the house, she returned to the sink to wash up the breakfast dishes. Jack jumped at her legs until he realized it was useless so he lay down at her feet doing his best puppy pout.

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§

Joe woke up that first morning in the hospital in a foul mood.

He hated being still and hated worse that he couldn’t get to the Café.

He looked at the clock hanging in the room and hoped that Pearl would remember everything to do on a Monday. He wasn't sure he had told her everything to do on a Monday. The more he thought about it the clearer it became that he needed to work even if he was in bed.

"Josh, wake up." Josh didn't stir even though he was asleep in a chair. The boy always could sleep through anything so Joe called louder in an angry voice "Damn it, Josh, wake up."

"What's wrong?" Josh started up stumbling out of the chair, afraid that something was wrong with his dad. The room was dim but lit from the light above the bed.

"Nothing's wrong other than I can't get to work and there is a lot of things to do on a Monday."

"Dad, you can't leave." Josh rubbed his eyes and looked at the clock. "You've got to be kidding. You awakened me at four thirty in the morning?" Josh's jaw showed that he was clenching his teeth because the muscles moved. His nose was flaring in anger.

"That Café won't run itself." Joe argued back.

"Pearl is going to be there. She will handle it."

"She can't handle everything." Joe was irritated but looked down at his right hand, playing nervously with the intravenous tube.

“She’s smarter than you think.” Josh shook his head and rolled his eyes.

“She can’t do what I’ve not trained her to do, can she?”

“You told me you were going to teach her all of the business.” Josh was losing his patience.

“I didn’t exactly have time before this damn leg gave out on me.”

Joe moved too quickly in his agitation and winced as pain shot through him. Seeing his dad in pain softened Josh’s demeanor and tone.

“What do I need to do?” He picked up his leather jacket from the chair. Pulled out his pack of cigarettes while he looked for his keys.

“I thought you quit those cancer sticks.” Joe pointed to the pack of Winstons.

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“I did for a time but started back. Don’t get on that soapbox now.

Tell me what you need from the house.” Josh put his coat on, tapped out a cigarette for when he got outside of the building, and fished out his lighter. He was exhausted. “Mind if I take a rest at your house before I return? It’s not like you can do anything at this time of the morning anyway.”

“Fine.” Joe was terse. He hated being dependent on anyone. “Bring

me one of Pearl's country ham biscuits when you come back. I'm not eating the junk they serve here."

Josh nodded his head and left the room. Joe clicked on the television and tried watching the morning news. That only made him agonize more about being bed ridden. He switched the television off and wondered what to do with himself. It wasn't time for breakfast but he was hungry. He looked at the bedside table and found some crackers remaining from the night before. He looked at the other side of the bed and someone had brought flowers. He couldn't reach them though.

He wondered who had sent flowers. His feelings were mixed because the gesture of someone felt loving but it was the first time he had ever gotten flowers. Well, except for when his wife died. "I guess they're from one of my customers," Joe spoke it aloud. He continued to look at the flowers as he munched on the crackers. He had planted so many flowers for his wife and she loved them but he loved them too. He even kept the beds going long after her death. He ate the last of the crackers and brushed the crumbs off his chest. He then tried scooting over to reach the card in the arrangement but he couldn't even touch the vase. The movement reminded him painfully that he wasn't going anywhere soon.

As soon as Pearl arrived at the Café, she wished she had ridden with Susan. Everything was so dark and Polly wasn't there yet. Pleasant Quarry wasn't a dangerous town but the highway brought so many strangers by. She hesitated before getting out of her truck. There was no traffic on the highway so she chided herself for being spooked. She got the keys ready so that she wouldn't fumble with them when she got to the door. She moved quick and determined. She was in the Café

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with the door locked back so fast that a stranger would have thought she did it all the time.

She turned on the lights and breathed a sigh of relief. As she walked to the kitchen, she looked around the dining room. It was the first time she had been there by herself. She began to imagine the changes she would make if she owned the place. The seed of a dream emerged and caused her to stand taller. She stopped at the counter and put her pocketbook in its regular spot. When she got to the cash register, she sat on Joe's stool to dream a little more though she knew she needed to get busy. She only allowed one minute for dreaming. When she opened the register, the drawer was empty. Joe always took the money



home with him. She would have to call and see where he left the money.

This knowledge put Pearl into high gear. She hurriedly turned on the grill and the cookers so they could be warming up. She turned on the dishwasher so the water tank would heat up and then returned to the front to call Joe. She prayed she wouldn't be waking him up but she didn't know what else to do. She grabbed one of Susan's order books and her pen and dialed the number to the hospital. When she finally got through to Joe, it was clear that while he was grumpy, he was relieved that she had called. His directions were clear and accurate and the register was ready before she got off the phone with him. By that time, Polly and Susan had arrived and were knocking at the door.

§

By ten o'clock, Josh walked in the door at the Café. He could have slept longer but his dad called and reamed him out for taking so long with his breakfast. Josh argued that he could have eaten the hospital food, but then felt bad because he wouldn't want to eat that food either. He had gotten by on less sleep when he was out on a gig but the worry weighed heavy on him. When he saw Susan smile at him, he felt better.

He walked to the kitchen to greet Pearl. She saw him before he

stepped up into the kitchen and met him with a hug.

“I see how Joe is, sent you to spy on me.” She winked but went back to the grill.

“You got that right.” Josh leaned on the counter near the sink.

“Dad actually wants one of your country ham biscuits.”

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“Did he want an egg this time?”

“He didn’t say.”

“I’ll make two biscuits the way he likes them. You can eat whatever he turns down.”

“Better make that four biscuits. I’m hungry and dad can save one for later.”

“How is the old mule anyway?” Pearl added the salty ham to the grill and flipped the sausages already cooking.

“Irritable, grumpy, restless...” Josh frowned.

“Same as usual eh?” Pearl smiled but Josh didn’t laugh. “He’ll be okay.”

“I know. Hate seeing him in pain. I’m going to go get some coffee.”

Before Josh could get to the coffee pot, Susan had poured him a cup and handed him a creamer. They briefly looked into each other’s eyes

for a moment, and broke away happier than before they shared the look.

Polly didn't even greet Josh. He was okay with that. They had never liked each other anyway. He sat at the table near the kitchen and sipped on his coffee, watching Susan work. Maybe they could see each other more while he was in town. He looked at the rest of the dining room and saw that it was rather crowded but he hadn't noticed anyone when he first came in; there was too much on his mind.

§

Joe was fit to be tied. One of the nurses joked with him that if he didn't calm down she was going to put restraints on him. She often came into the Café so she could get away with the jokes. He tried eating the nasty hospital food but it was slimy. He was starving by the time Josh came in with the biscuits. Josh placed the cafe's white to-go bag on his dad's lap and pulled over the portable table. Joe looked in the bag and felt better. He thought he could forgive Josh since he had four biscuits, though he didn't think he could eat four. He pulled one out to see how Pearl had prepared it and took a bit of the ham and egg biscuit.

"Thanks, son," he offered with his mouth full.

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“You’re welcome. Two are for me so don’t eat my share.” Josh placed a Styrofoam cup of coffee on the table and then grabbed the bag from his dad.

“Leave me one of the ham biscuits.” Joe slurped some coffee.

“How was everything at the Café?”

“Smooth sailing.” Josh looked in the back for napkins. “Dang I forgot the files and left them in the car.” He dropped the wrapped biscuit on the table and started towards the door.

“Sit down and eat. You can get that later.” The two men shared a meal and by the time Joe finished his second biscuit, his mood had lightened. “Sorry about this morning. All these years of running around, riding horses, motorcycles and I never broke any bones.” He shook his head, took another sip of coffee. “I was not meant to be still for long.”

“I know pop. You’ll be okay. Has the doctor come in yet?”

“Yes. He said I’ll be here another day and then I will have to have a cast on my leg for six to eight weeks. I have to be off of it for two weeks.” Joe stared into the space in front of him. “I don’t know how I’m going to do that.” Josh leaned forward in his seat to give his dad his full attention.

“I know it’s hard but I’m going to be here for you and...”

“You have to work.” Joe interrupted.

“I’ve got two weeks’ vacation coming to me. If I need it, I can ask my boss for a family leave of absence.”

“Don’t want you getting in trouble with your boss,” Joe looked at him pointedly.

“It’s my vacation and Maersk is really great when it comes to taking care of family.” Josh stood up and stretched. “I’m going to go get those files. Need anything while I’m out?”

“No.” Joe watched Josh leave and felt sad and helpless. He had his pride and didn’t want to ask for help but he needed the help. He hoped Josh had remembered to bring the checkbook and the file of phone numbers for his suppliers. When he got out of the hospital, he was going to have to have that long talk with Pearl.

He leaned back into his pillow and looked out the window. He knew he should have talked to Pearl years ago, before the accident, but it was too hard. Joe wanted her to love him, not hate him. He still didn’t know her as well as he wanted to before talking to her. Now he had little choice. He pushed the table away from the bed and mumbled

“You idiot, you’re thinking like you’re dying and it’s only a broken leg.”

Josh walked back in the door.

“What?”

“Nothing. Talking to myself. That was fast.” Joe reached for the files. Josh had remembered everything. “Did you say anything to her?”

“Nope. Not my place, that’s yours.” Josh reprimanded his father with the tone in his voice and a tilt of his head.

“One thing more I’ll need your help with though.” Joe pulled a card and a sheet of paper out of a file. “I need you to go by the attorney’s office. The bastard hasn’t called me back yet and I’ve called him and written him.” He handed Josh the paper and card. “The card has his address. The letter is my copy of the letter I sent so don’t let him have it.” Joe could feel his energy waning and his leg ached more. He leaned back again and saw the flowers. “Hand me that card.”

Josh was reading the letter, looked up only long enough to hand his dad the card from the flowers. As he completed the letter, he raised his eyebrows. “This is pretty generous.”

“Not really. Son, I’m going to need to rest.”

“Okay.” Josh leaned over and kissed his dad on top of his head. The moment was awkward since they rarely kissed even though they loved each other. Josh wrote a number on the back of one of the napkins.

“Here’s a number to call if you need me. I bought me one of those new cell phones. Call collect though because it’s a Charlotte number.

If I don’t answer, I’ll be in the lawyer’s office.”

“Thanks again.” Joe opened the envelope from the flowers as Josh left the room. They were from Pearl.

§

By two o’clock, everyone at the Café was dragging. Pearl was glad that Joe had taught Susan how to run the register. She didn’t have a moment to help with anything on the floor. Susan and Polly raced all day with hardly a break. Pearl thought she might have to talk with Joe about getting another helper for as long as Joe was gone.

When Sam walked in, Pearl found that she was agitated with her.

She shook her head and grimaced at the batch of fries she was cooking.

She needed to make herself clear that she didn’t have time for this mess this week. If Sam was going to push, Pearl would have to get blunt and

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tell her to back the hell off. Pearl took the fries out of the fryer and slammed the basket onto its hanger. She looked one more time into the dining room and Sam placed an order. Pearl emptied the fries into the bin, salted the fries and returned to the burgers.

By the time she looked up again, Sam was gone. She didn't know whether to feel relieved or hurt. She wiped her hands on her apron and looked at the clock. It was already past three o'clock. She leaned back and stretched, feeling as if she had been through a marathon. She was glad the day was over. She walked to the counter and grabbed her keys. When she walked to the door, her feet let her know that they had worked all day and needed a break. She locked the door, flipped over the door sign to "closed," and sat down at the booth near the door. She was so tired that she didn't want to make more trips to let folks out of the Café.

Polly took her mustard and ketchup bottles to a table nearer the register, sat down and started pouring the emptier bottles together. Susan scooped up some ice, poured her some unsweetened tea and walked to sit with Pearl.

"Pshew. We did it." Susan grinned.

"Shore did. I ain't never been this tired before." Pearl rose to let two women out the door. "Thanks, and come back." She plopped back into the booth. "You're the young'un. You let the next folks out."

Then Pearl grinned back to Susan "I'm proud of you girl." She patted Susan's hand on the table and Susan looked at her, surprised.

"Thank you. I'm proud of you too." Susan found herself wishing



that Pearl had been her mother. She had always needed encouragement and to know that she made her mother proud. She never got that, only comments about mistakes. Susan shook the memory out of her head, wanting to savor Pearl's kindness. She stood up to unlock the door for the last couple leaving. "Y'all come back now." She waved at them, locked the door, and sat back down.

"Polly, you okay?" Pearl called; too tired to stand.

"Tired. Ready to go home." Polly stood up, took the empty bottles to the dishwasher, and returned with her cigarettes. "Mind if I smoke in here?"

"Polly, you know Joe don't want that." Pearl was disappointed that Polly would ask.

"Damn it to hell," Polly huffed towards the back door. Pearl could hear her flicking her lighter trying to get the cigarette lit before hitting

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the door. Pearl and Susan heard it slam closed. They both shook their heads. Both sat still for a few moments. Pearl could feel her energy sinking further.

"Better get to cleaning up before I poop out." Polly rose to go to the kitchen.

“Shit. I better call the nursery and let them know I might be late.

Oh, and that fella Sam left a note for you.” Susan stood, pulled something out of her pocket and handed Pearl a small envelope. Susan raced to the phone and didn’t notice Pearl’s nervousness.

Pearl was still standing near the front door when she heard a knock.

It was Josh. Pearl put the envelope in her apron pocket and opened the door. “What are you doing back here?”

“Figured you could use some help with clean up.”

“You are an angel from heaven,” Pearl exclaimed and laughed.

They both walked back to get bins and rags. Pearl hurriedly stashed the envelope in her purse. “Josh, do you know how to close out the register?”

“Yep.” He detoured from the kitchen to the register and started running a tape. “I always loved doing this though dad only let me a few times.” The three of them laughed at this since they knew Joe was territorial about the register. When they heard Polly’s angry return, everyone turned from the laughter and began to clean.

§

Pearl told Josh to give her regrets to Joe; she was too tired to go to Concord and visit. Josh said he knew that his dad would understand. He also promised Pearl that he would talk Joe into some extra help.

Everyone heard that part and chimed in though Polly's comments were not exactly as pleasing as chimes. Josh and Susan were clearly enamored with each other but Pearl was too tired to offer to babysit Rachel. Taking care of Jack would be enough for that night. She did her best to ignore them even though she was happy for them. Polly left as soon as she could without saying a word to anyone. They were all exhausted and knew not to be offended by Polly.

Josh took the deposit to the bank so that Pearl could go home.

Susan left to pick Rachel up at the day care. While she was alone, Pearl couldn't wait to read Sam's note. She turned out the lights and locked

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the door to be safe. When she read it, she found that she was pleased and excited.

*My Dear Pearl,*

*I look forward to the time when we can talk longer. My hope is that you might take*

*time to give me your address. You can leave it in a separate note or call me if that's*

*better. I merely would like to write you while I'm waiting. I've looked for you ever*

*since I returned to North Carolina. Forever yours, Sam*

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### 31 FAMILY

Leah was finishing her lesson plans for the following week when she heard a knock at the door. She was glad that she'd been diligent during the afternoon even though it had been a gorgeous day. She felt a sense of accomplishment and only hoped that the person at the door was not Mrs. Berringer. She started to dread running into the old bat. She saw that she forgot to lock the front door and was annoyed and frowning as she opened the door.

"Hey. What are you doing here?" She stepped back to let Kat into the room.

"Glad to see you too." Kat was all smiles and carried a bottle of wine and flowers.

"Sorry, I was annoyed that I didn't lock the front door." When she turned back to Kat, she tried to smile. "What's up?"

"Angela went home with a friend so I thought I would offer to take you out for dinner. I brought these for you in case you were too tired and said no." Kat held the gifts out in a generous manner.

"That's thoughtful of you." Leah took the gifts and turned away from Kat. "Come on in the living room. I just finished some work so

my mind is in task mode. Give me a minute to change gears and I can give you an answer.” She put the wine and flowers on the table and returned to her desk. She was a little annoyed even though the gifts were nice. Kat had followed her to the small office at the back and stood in the doorway.

“I can go. Thought it was worth a try.” Kat sounded resigned to defeat and that made Leah feel bad. It was a nice offer and she had to eat.

“No, it’s okay. Needed to close this file and will need to change out of these ratty jeans.” Leah closed a file on her computer. She ran her fingers through her hair not knowing how sexy the move was to anyone watching.

“Nice.” Kat lifted her eyes suggestively. “You don’t need to change clothes, though if you want to slip into something more comfortable I would understand.”

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“Not a bad idea but I’m hungry.” Leah poked Kat’s rib playfully and pushed her towards the front door. “You’re choosing where we’re going though, I still don’t know my way around.”

§

The next morning, Leah woke up with Kat still in her bed. She made a silent face and guessed she had drunk too much at the Pizza Hut. When she remembered the day, she also realized she had to get to class. “Damn it,” she shouted as she climbed over Kat to get out of the bed.

“What? Come ‘ere,” Kat grabbed her and nuzzled Leah’s bare breasts.

“Stop it. I’ve got to go to work.” She pulled away and hurriedly began to dress. “Get your ass out of my bed.” She lost her balance as she tried to put on her heels.

“What happened to spending all day in bed fucking?” Kat was angry.

“I was drunk and that was wishful thinking. Come on, I’ve got to go.” Leah rushed to brush her teeth and freshen up. She didn’t want to teach and smell like sex with the young men in her class. While some of them were gay, the others were not and tried to hit on her regularly.

When she went to grab her briefcase, Kat was in her office.

“What are you looking for?” Leah stuffed her paperwork in the briefcase, snapped it shut, and raced towards the front door. Kat lagged behind and responded.

“I was trying to help but then didn’t know what you needed.”

“Come on! Let’s go, let’s go.” She locked the door and Kat was standing on the porch like an idiot. “God Kat, get your truck out of the way.”

“Thought I would give you a goodbye kiss,” she leaned towards Leah who pushed her away.

“What don’t you understand about time to go?” Leah was furious and she obviously ticked Kat off because the truck tires squealed as she pulled away. “Too bad!” she yelled in her car.

At the stoplight, she looked at the clock in the car and realized she could relax a bit. She would make it on time after all. She preferred to be thirty minutes early to class so that helped. She decided if she was

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going to continue to be in a relationship with Kat, she would have to give her a schedule or turn her away if she showed up unannounced.

§

When Leah came home later that day, she found a pleasant surprise. Her dad’s Jaguar was parked outside her apartment. She hadn’t seen him for a couple of weeks and he had never come to see her apartment. As she pulled into the carport, she saw him sitting on her porch with a bottle of Cheerwine, the burgundy red cherry soda made only in

North Carolina. She thought about how much he loves Cheerwine. He stood to greet her.

“Deddy!” They embraced briefly as Leah continued “I sure hope you haven’t been out here long.” She opened the screen door to unlock the door to the parlor. He seemed comfortable and warm even though he was only wearing his chinos and a fleece jacket.

“Not too long.” He wiped his feet in hard, repetitive motions on the doormat. Leah knew it was from a lifetime of being conditioned by his mother not to mess up her house.

“Dad, my house is a mess.” Leah was thinking fast on how to explain if there was underwear on the floor. “I mean, it’s filthy.”

“Don’t worry about it.” He stated flatly. It was clear he had something on his mind and it concerned her.

She hurried her dad into the living room asking for time to change into jeans. “What a crazy fucking day,” she thought as she changed clothes “no pun intended either.” Before she returned to her dad, she made sure she picked up the bra that Kat had thrown on her rocker. She threw the comforter over the bed to give some semblance of order. When she entered the living room, he was reading her Smithsonian magazine. He put it on the coffee table and stood up.

“Ready to go?” He was impatient.



“But you just got here.” She was exasperated.

“Honey, we have to meet the realtor before they close.” He looked at his watch.

“What realtor? I thought this was a nice surprise visit because you love your daughter.” She sat down on the couch to pout. She knew she was acting like a princess and didn’t care. She looked up to see a confused look on his face.

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“Surprise? I sent you a letter to tell you I was coming out here.” He sat beside of her. “You mean you didn’t get it?”

“No letter, though I didn’t check today’s mail.” She went to the front and got the mail in the box. “Nothing here either.”

He looked puzzled. He checked with her to make sure he had the correct address then sighed “Guess I put the wrong zip code. I sent it via Fed Ex. Will have Marsha track it when I get to the office tomorrow.” He looked again at his watch.

A knock at the door interrupted them. Her dad watched as she walked to the door. It was Kat again. She would have to introduce them.

“Kat. Come in.” While her back was to her dad, she mouthed to

Kat not to say anything. “You can meet my dad.” Leah could feel Kat’s excitement behind her as they walked.

“Hi, I’m Tomas.” Always the gentleman, he bowed to Kat who then reached out her hand.

“Nice to meet you. I’ve heard so much about you.” Kat was smiling and dressed in professional attire. At least if she had to meet Leah’s dad, she made a good first impression.

Leah’s dad looked at his watch “Listen we’ve probably missed that realtor anyway. I’ll call him later and get back with you Leah. Instead, how about I take you ladies to dinner? I was about to offer to take Leah anyway. You might as well join us.”

“I would love that.” Kat responded before Leah could think about it.

“Is there a place on the way back to Charlotte since I’ll need to head back afterward?”

“The Firelight Inn is a cozy restaurant in Harrisburg. If that would be suitable?”

“Excellent. Can I meet you two there?”

“Sure.” Kat responded with enthusiasm. “Or Leah, you can ride with your dad and I can lead the way.”

“Thanks,” she said and grabbed her dad’s arm for an escort. “Let’s

go.” She was glad for the offer to be with her dad.

The two of them caught up on her mother and all that was happening back at home. She remembered to ask her dad about the letter she missed, but he said she would have to wait. It was a surprise he had for her. She always loved these surprises when a realtor was involved. He often designed inspiring homes and named the best

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designs after his daughters. The surprise often was a visit to one of the designer homes as well as some other celebratory gift for the house’s namesake. Her father was generous; the surprise could just as easily be a car.

All through the dinner, Leah was impressed with how confident Kat was in talking about architecture and design. She was respectful and did not make Leah uncomfortable in front of him. By the time the meal was over, she had a new appreciation for Kat. She didn’t know what she had expected from her. Although Leah tried not to be a judgmental person, she knew that she was at times her mother’s child. She never wanted to be a snob. Her mother had a gardener who had a Master’s degree in business once. By the time Kat had chauffeured her home, she decided it would be nice to have another night together.

Besides, tomorrow she had no classes. “Kat, can you stay over? I mean, does your daughter have a sitter for the night?”

§

Pearl had not called Sam on Monday night and then all the next day she worried about Sam. Susan had gone over to Joe’s house with Rachel to watch a movie. If Pearl was going to call Sam, she should take advantage of the time alone. She didn’t want to call Sam yesterday because she needed sleep and was afraid the nightmares would begin again. Instead, her mind dug up old sexy memories of when she and Sam necked out under the stars at Gibson Lake.

They were lucky Rowan University’s security guards never caught them. That might have been twenty-five years ago but her body remembered the excitement and the thrill. Her body was humming and her hand was on the phone. She savored the feelings. She couldn’t call Sam while she was in the heat of a moment; her voice might betray her. Pearl still wasn’t sure what she wanted.

She walked to the door to see what was happening in the neighborhood. She sat on the couch and turned on the television. She wondered where Jack was and knew he was into something because it was too quiet. She called out and walked towards her bedroom because she had seen him there last. She caught him as he chewed the second

shoe lace in two. “Bad dog.” She bent and scooped him up and took him to his crate.

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Once she had tied knots in the shoes, her mood was sufficiently altered that it was safe to call Sam. The only mood present was annoyance. Sam was true to her word and did not offer to chat, only wrote down the address that Pearl shared. After she ended the call, Pearl discovered that she was disappointed “Well be that way.” She huffed and puffed. Jack whined and she felt sorry for him, so she let him out of his crate.

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32 VALENTINES

The weeks passed and while Joe was out, he hired his cousin, Matt, to help at the Café. Pearl gained confidence as her knowledge grew about the business side of the Café. Joe kept saying he had something important to tell her and that she needed to make time to see him. By the end of each day, she was too exhausted to care.

Sam sent her love letters or letters telling about her life since they were last together. For the first few weeks, Pearl read them without

responding, then saved them in a shoe box under her bed. When Sam sent her flowers on Valentine's Day, Pearl felt she owed her a thank you note. That's when the letter writing got serious; she couldn't wait to get off work to go home and write a letter. They were renewing the flame.

Jack did not love the letter writing and discovered a neat way to get Pearl's attention. He couldn't get to shoes anymore, but he found the box of letters under the bed. He tore that box up viciously, and sampled some of the letters. Pearl was mad as a hornet at him for that. She always forgave him when he made mistakes though and afterward, they went for walks. Antonio often joined Pearl and Jack on the walks. Sometimes they all visited at the Covington's' house. Jack seemed glad to have such a happy home. Pearl wondered if he had been missing Rachel and Susan though.

Susan had become rather secretive when she and Rachel were at home. It was clear to Pearl that Susan was falling in love with Josh. He had spent those weeks at his dad's to help him while Joe was stuck at home. Susan and Josh were shocked when Joe offered to watch Rachel one night while they went for a walk. Joe grew so fond of Rachel that he started calling her his "little girl" and she started calling him "pawpaw". They were often quite silly with one another and it was

clear that the child helped Joe forget about being stuck at home.

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Susan fretted that Rachel was calling Joe and Pearl names that should be reserved for her parents, for Rachel's biological grandparents. Rachel had never met them, however. Pearl and Joe were the only older people that Rachel knew in an intimate manner. She loved the Covingtons, but they never spent time in the trailer. The one time she met Polly, Rachel cried in fear. Heck, Polly was so ornery she made Susan afraid of her at times. At night, after Susan had returned to the trailer, she and Josh often talked on the phone after Rachel had fallen asleep. He encouraged her to reconnect with her parents.

Pearl and Joe had said the same thing, but Susan didn't know if she could bear the rejection again. At the same time, she missed her sister terribly and had lost touch with her after she moved. She had tried calling her sister, but the phone had been disconnected. One night, she picked up the phone to call her parents. Perhaps it would work. As soon as she heard her mother's voice, she changed her mind and hung up. She slept fitfully that night.

Maddie was caught up in preparation for several pottery shows. The one originally set for Valentine's Day was moved to March. That same

month she usually had a booth at Charlotte's Spring Home and Garden Show. That meant she needed twice as much inventory as usual for March. She rarely went out and took breaks only to walk the dog or ride the horse. She was so engrossed in her work that she forgot about love and the world at large. She did keep up with Pearl and offered her the use of her house if she needed a private place away from the trailer when meeting with Sam. Pearl was worried about losing Susan's friendship if she knew she had been involved with a woman. Maddie knew Susan was open and would always love Pearl, but she understood Pearl's fears.

Leah and Kat continued to date and live in separate places. Leah was not ready to be a parent and Kat liked to boss her around too much. Kat always came over when Angela was at her dad's or staying with a friend. They were already much like an old married couple. Their sexual encounters continued, but the passion died quickly. Leah often thought about calling everything off with Kat, but worried how Kat would respond. She began to fear that Kat would attempt to ruin her reputation at Rowan University. That kind of publicity would ruin her career forever as an instructor. At least that's how it felt since Leah had no interest in moving to New York. While driving to work Leah often wondered if this was meant to be her life or if someone better was out



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there for her...but who? She had never heard back from Maddie and that saddened her. She guessed she had blown her chances by missing the invitation to the House Blessing.

At the end of February, the Piedmont warmed with crocuses and daffodils breaking through the cold ground. Pearl was delighted one morning when she walked out to see her walkway lined with crocus leaves. She knew that Susan wasn't there to plant them in the fall, but later found out the flowers were a gift planted by Maddie while Pearl was at work. Susan began clearing the yard in front of the trailer to make flowerbeds. The day that Josh helped with the yard, he warned Pearl that he felt sure his dad was going to show up at the Café. Everyone had cabin fever. While the winter was mild, everyone was tired of the dark.

§

The day Joe hobbled into the Café seemed like a party. All his customers were glad to see him back in the diner. He had not allowed any visitors but Susan and Rachel in his home (although he kept phoning Pearl to come talk to him). He had missed the place. He loved the smell of bacon and sausage first thing in the morning. He loved

seeing the scruffy old men in their overalls or plaid shirts. Some of the blue-haired women gave him hugs as he made his way to the kitchen.

He could not stand being stuck in a house for another day.

Pearl had been in the cooler out back when he came in, so she had not heard the hullabaloo on the floor. She merely returned to cooking ham, stirring the grits, making toast, and filling orders. She dropped an egg when Joe bellowed behind her back,

“Where the hell have you been Pearl?” When she turned, she saw he was all smiles.

“Lord have mercy,” Pearl hugged him tight “if I’d known you were coming in I would have taken the day off.” She was surprised at how much she had missed him.

“Clean up that egg and make me a fresh one,” Joe said as he turned. He was joking at being bossy. Pearl could tell he still wasn’t quite up to par and looked pale. She started to help him down the stairs and he fussed “I can do it myself.” Pearl caught Josh’s eye. He rushed to his

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dad to assure he wouldn’t fall again. Josh and Joe sat at their favorite table. Susan brought them coffee and Polly quipped,

“It’s about time you got your ass in here.” She even tried to smile.

She didn't miss him, but she didn't wish him ill either.

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Maddie was glad for a break when her phone rang. She had emptied the kiln and started to price the pieces she would take to the garden show. It was also close to lunchtime. She was surprised to hear that it was Pearl calling from work. Pearl never called from work, but she wanted Maddie to know Joe was in the diner. Maddie thought a visit to the Café would be a good reward for finishing her pots and being ahead of her deadlines.

She enjoyed the sunshine on the drive into Pleasant Quarry. People were out working in their yards. As she waited at the light beside the pharmacy, she began to rub her neck. She had been pushing hard, day and night to make sure she was ready. People often thought being self-employed meant less work when in fact it often meant more work. She took a couple of breaths and reminded herself that she was good to go. She had completed her tasks two weeks before the show. She could relax for a couple of days at least. When she pulled into the parking lot, Maddie wondered if Pearl had called the entire town. There was not a place to park so she turned back home. Pearl would understand.

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Joe was only at the Café for an hour before he felt worn out. Before

leaving he made Pearl promise to come over to his house on Sunday. He said he needed to talk to her about something important. She couldn't think for the world what it might be. Everything had gone fine at the Café while he was gone and he seemed pleased. She knew they were doing good from the number of customers. Josh had kept up with the deposits for his dad. Maybe Joe wanted her to take that over so Josh could get back to his place in Charlotte. She was supposed to meet Sam on Sunday for lunch and a movie. She didn't think she could tell Joe about Sam and in fact, found it hard to believe that Joe hadn't figured out Sam was a dyke. Her heart fluttered in fear thinking

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about talking to Joe and then fluttered another way thinking about Sam. She wasn't sure how long she could put up with a fluttery heart.

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34 LIFE COMES TOGETHER

Sunday rose over the wheat fields of Cabarrus County with the sky glowing red, pink and orange. The girls were still in bed when Pearl awakened. She took Jack for a walk, then put on a pot of coffee to brew while she pulled on some slacks. After making some toast, she

took her light breakfast on the front step to sit in the beautiful spring morning. The morning was still cool enough to need a jacket, but it was better than winter. Jack was jumping at a snail in the path, trying to get it to play with him. Once he jumped into Pearl and sloshed her coffee. She couldn't be mad at him since he was such a cute thing. Besides, he was only being a puppy. As she finished her coffee, she decided to ride over to Joe's. She figured he would be up since the sun was up. She was sure he wouldn't be out driving yet.

Pearl grabbed her purse, her coat, Jack's leash, and her keys. "Want to go for a ride Jack?" He bounced up and down as if to say yes but she could tell he liked the sound of her voice. He still had not learned what the word "ride" meant. She knew it wouldn't take long. After she put him in the truck, he took his place beside her until she cranked the truck. Then he tried to crawl between the steering wheel and her heart. She laughed and put Jack back beside of her, assuring him he was going to be okay. She kept the truck in park so he could listen to the engine. She wanted to make sure he wouldn't panic. When she put the truck into reverse, he laid down. She could see him trying to cling to the Naugahyde seat with his little paws. She put her hand on his back to keep him calm until they got on the highway.

The trip to Joe's was a feast for the eyes. It was a gorgeous new day.

Pearl hoped that Joe wouldn't ask any favors of her today. She had told Sam she still wanted to go out with her and today was the day. They were to meet at Rowan University around noon, and then ride together into Salisbury where no one would know Pearl and catch a movie. Sam had been open about being a lesbian even in college, so she didn't care where they went. Pearl was still afraid, even if her parents were no longer living. She was so caught up in her thoughts that she drove past

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Joe's driveway. She did her three-point turn all the while commending Jack for being such a brave puppy.

Approaching Joe's house, she could see he, too was taking advantage of the nice spring morning. As she drove down the long dirt driveway to his house, she could see him on the front porch reading the paper. He lowered it at one point to see who was coming down the driveway. When she was close to the house, Pearl waved nonchalantly and Joe started folding his paper. She could hear Joe's dog barking in the distance and figured he would be at the truck door before Jack could get out.

"Come on Jack, let's go see Joe and Charlie." Jack wouldn't move but cringed on the seat and whimpered. The sound of Charlie running

made Pearl step into the doorway so that Charlie's enthusiasm wouldn't further frighten the puppy. "Good morning Charlie." Jack was curious and peeked around her back. She petted him on the head and saw that Jack's tail had started wagging. When Charlie saw the puppy, he nosed forward slowly. Pearl moved aside and Charlie stepped up on the truck step, then gently leaned in to smell Jack and lick his face. Then he hopped down and performed his play pose encouraging Jack. Jack was eager to get down so Pearl helped him out of the cab. The dogs performed their formal greetings and then followed Pearl up to the porch. Joe was still sitting when Pearl spoke. "Good Morning. Guess I shoulda called first but I was afraid I would wake Josh."

"Aw that's all right. You know I'm always up early."

"Purty day isn't it?"

"Sure 'nough. There's some coffee in the house if you want some."

"Think I will. Do you need a refill?"

"If you don't mind."

Pearl took Joe's cup and got one for herself. The steam from the hot coffee rose in curls as she walked back on the porch. Jack raced up onto the porch glad that she had not left him. Joe scooped him up just as Jack almost tripped Pearl.

“What a fine pup you are Jack.” Joe petted him roughly while Jack wiggled to get to his mama. Joe put him down on the porch and laughed. “Looks like you already got him spoiled.”

“Well, I make him mind, but he’s still a baby.” She smiled at Jack and rubbed his back. He flopped down at her feet. For a few moments,

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Joe and Pearl sat in silence sipping coffee and looking at the neighboring fields. Charlie lay down at Joe’s feet but then slid over closer to the puppy and then rolled on his back. The puppy couldn’t resist and jumped playfully on Charlie. Joe and Pearl watched the dogs and smiled. There was an ease between the two of them. Finally, Pearl decided to cut to the chase.

“Alright now, what is it you need to talk to me about that’s so important?”

Joe’s lips tightened into a serious expression, he sighed, then leaned over to put his elbows on his knees. He was holding his cup with both hands and looking at the coffee as if the brew had an interesting story.

“Joe?”

“Sorry. Well, do you want the good news or the bad news first?”

Joe set his cup on the table between them and sat back in his chair.



Then he turned the chair so he could face her, but he wasn't looking her in the eyes. It was more like he was looking at her chin.

"I don't know Joe. Have I done something wrong at work?" She felt vulnerable. Joe looked up then.

"No, no, no. The good news part is that I've completed paperwork to make you part owner of the restaurant." He moved his newspaper and picked up a folder underneath it. "The paperwork is here."

"What?" Pearl gasped "I don't have any money to be part owner of your café."

"Not one cent from you will be required. We've known each other all these years Pearl even though we weren't close before..."

"I'm not marrying you Joe." Pearl blurted it out before she could cover her mouth.

"Hell, I ain't asking you to marry me, Pearl." Joe laughed a belly laugh at that one. The dogs stopped their playing to look up at the humans. Joe wiped tears from his eyes from laughing so hard. Pearl didn't think it was THAT funny. "I'm not sure how to explain." Joe saw the look in Pearl's face and sobered up. He took a deep breath before continuing. "I guess it's best to just say it. Pearl, I'm your half-brother."

He paused and waited before continuing. Pearl's eyebrows were up

in surprise and her mouth gaped open. “The reason your deddy loaned me that money those years back was because he was also my deddy and I was in a bind.” Joe started sweating and Pearl continued to stare at him with the open-mouthed, surprised look. “I know I should’a told

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you after he died but I just couldn’t. You were so devastated, I didn’t think you could handle the news. I mean look at you now - in shock.” He pointed at her and it was the first time Pearl realized she was sitting with her mouth open. She closed her mouth, cleared her throat, and swallowed but she could not speak so she looked out over the field. She was trembling inside. She wasn’t sure if it was confusion, gladness, or anger.

Joe sat quietly allowing her some thinking time. The dogs knew something was up. Charlie turned around and laid his head on his paws. Jack stood on his hind legs asking Pearl to pick him up. She put him in her lap mindlessly while still looking at the field. He licked her cheek and she kissed him on the head and looked down at him, still silent. Joe shook his head, wishing he had known a better way to break the news to her. He could see she was trembling. He didn’t know if she was afraid or mad. He doubted she would cry, she wasn’t the type.

Joe decided to look down at the floor until she spoke. They sat in the stillness for a couple of minutes before Pearl spoke with a shaky voice.

“Why didn’t deddy want me to know I had a brother?”

“My mama was his old girlfriend before he married your mama. I found some letters he wrote to her when they were dating. I wanted a deddy so bad.” Joe looked over the field and Pearl could feel his longing still. “Mama wouldn’t take me to see him. She never told him so he didn’t know. I always talked to him when I saw him but knew I would get a beating if I said anything to him while I was small. She always beat me for senseless things, anyway.” He lifted his head and looked at Pearl. She saw pain in his eyes as he said “Deddy made the right choice marrying your mama.”

“How did deddy finally find out?”

“When I turned sixteen I was a hellion and finally big enough to defend myself. I had been working at the old grill since I was fifteen. Mama would have started me at twelve if there weren’t child labor laws. Anyway, I was making some money and figured I could hold my own in the world. More than anything, I wanted a man to talk to who wasn’t one of the drunkards my mama always dated.” A look of disgust took over Joe’s face at the memory. “I had been watching deddy plow his fields and knew when he would take a lunch break or a water break. I

watched him every day I wasn't working until I caught him alone." Joe looked at Pearl sincerely "I wasn't trying to make trouble mind you,

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though I didn't really think about how it would affect your mama. All I could think about were my own needs at that age. You were around six I guess. After I told him, he didn't deny it. Told me I looked just like his uncle and that he had often wondered. He didn't seem shocked at all. He did ask me not to tell your mama, but to let him figure out a way."

"What did he do?"

"I don't know. He always said that was his business. I do know that she had a nervous breakdown and for a while, I think they had a hard time together."

"Yeah, I remember a lot of yelling going on when I was in first grade. It's why I started hanging out at the barn during the day and studying so hard at night." Pearl had been calm and gentle with her responses. She had soothed Jack to sleep. She was still looking at the sleeping puppy while processing all that Joe told her. He could tell she was stunned but at least she didn't yell at him.

"Pearl," she looked up at Joe as he spoke "I'm sorry."

“What are you sorry about?” She paused. “You didn’t ask to be born, did you? You didn’t force deddy to have his way with your mama. I just wish I had known all these years that I had a brother. Why didn’t you come around more? I remember you here every now and then, but not much.”

“Your mama didn’t want me around. I do know she told him she figured he had sowed some wild oats, but she didn’t want a constant reminder of it in her house or yard.” Joe paused and looked out to the field again. “She had always been so nice to me telling me what a fine young man I would turn out to be. When she found out who exactly I was, she didn’t talk to me much after that. She wasn’t mean or anything if our paths crossed, but I could see how it hurt her.”

“Joe, look at me.” Joe looked her in the eyes. “I know what I’m going to ask is hard but I want you to tell me the truth. Why in the world didn’t you come tell me once we were adults? I wouldn’t have told mama or deddy.” Joe looked at the hurt in her face and grimaced.

“I just didn’t know you well enough to know how close you were to your mama. Deddy told me about your life so I would know you, but he didn’t talk about how you two got along. I didn’t want to risk losing the relationship with deddy.” Joe hung his head in shame. If only he had known Pearl better....

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“If mama wouldn’t let you come around, how did you have a relationship with deddy?”

“Like I said, your mama wasn’t mean. She let him come to my ballgames and every Saturday, while you went shopping with your mom, he took me out to lunch or we would find a place where we could sit and talk. We kept that up until I owned the restaurant. Then he was always my first customer and we would talk while I fixed his breakfast. He really loved your mama you know.”

“Yes, and she loved him.”

Joe took a deep breath and leaned back into his chair. He felt like a dark weight was removed from his shoulders. Pearl watched a bird chirping in the tree beside the porch. The morning was emotional, but both were strong like their deddy. Pearl broke the silence,

“So, what’s the bad news?” She attempted a smile.

“That’s it. I’m your brother.” He gulped and felt like he had asked her to live with him. He hoped she didn’t want to do that since he had not asked. He had lived by himself for too long and was ready to be rid of Josh even. He wanted his silence.

“The only bad news I see in that is that you waited so darn long to

tell me.” She spoke tersely. “I can’t believe that deddy didn’t tell me. That hurts.”

“You were too young at first. Then after what happened to you with that woman, I think he didn’t want to harm you?”

Pearl tensed “What woman?” She held her breath waiting for his response.

“Aw Pearl, I know what happened with that woman from Rowan University. It don’t bother me none. What did bother me was that your mama sent you off. Just so you know, deddy had nothing to do with that. When he finally found out where your mama sent you, he went after you. He’s the one that brought you home.”

“I know. I remember that much. I don’t know how you can say my mama wasn’t mean for sending me off.” She shuddered at the memories.

“Look, I don’t know what you went through other than heartbreak. I do know this, I’m sure your mama loved you but she was afraid for your soul. At least, that’s what deddy told me. He made sure nobody else knew what you went through though.”

“Did everybody else know about you?”

“I don’t think so. Mostly I think they had such a respect for your deddy and mama that they couldn’t imagine such a thing.”

“What does Josh know?”

“That you’re my sister and his aunt. He’s the one that helped me get the paperwork in order.” Joe tapped the file on the table.

“Joe, you know you don’t have to do this. I was irritated with you back in December and upset about everything. I wasn’t trying to get you to pay me anything. I just wanted the freedom to make my own choices for once in my life. You don’t owe me nothing.”

“I know, Pearl. I just want to share it with you. You are a natural at it. Deddy said that Uncle Loyce was a natural too.”

“Uncle Loyce? I thought he died young.”

“Yea, he’s the one who bled to death after having his appendix removed.”

“I always hated that story, made me think he was scary.”

“Deddy said he worked at the old grill and was hoping to buy it right before he died.”

Pearl felt as though she had been emotionally bombed. She leaned over and set Jack back on the porch. The puppy shook himself and then waddled down the stairs to plop in the wet grass. Charlie stayed asleep on the porch. Pearl finally exhaled. Joe asked, “Are we still



friends?” Pearl paused, looked at an ant crawling on the porch.

“Of course, we are. At least you didn’t fire me. I’ll admit it’s a lot to take in right now.”

“You can take these papers with you and look at them if you want.”

Pearl looked at the papers and felt excitement mixed in with hurt, anger, and other emotions fighting for her attention.

“I might do that. I won’t be able to get them back to you this week though, Joe. It’s just too much.”

“I know.” Joe leaned forward again and clasped his hands between his knees. “Mostly I want you to know I care for you and always have. I want to be a good brother to you.”

“You’re a good man. I’m sure you’ll be a fine brother.” Pearl stood and stretched before moving towards the stairs. She was trying to move slowly so she wouldn’t offend Joe, but she couldn’t wait to leave. Joe handed her the folder but remained in his chair.

“I would stand up to hug you but...”

“Joe, I am not a hugger even if you’re now my brother.” They both smiled, more at ease than before. “I’m heading on.” She walked down

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the stairs, squatted at the bottom, and called Jack to her. As the two

neared the truck, Joe called to her.

“Pearl, call me if you need anything...anything.” He pointed his finger at her for emphasis. It was a gesture she had seen her deddy use all the time when emphasizing his love and concern for her.

“I will.” She smiled weakly.

She was in a daze as she loaded Jack into the truck. He whined for his new friend for a moment and then sensed his mama’s distress. He lay down tight against her thigh as they moved down the dirt drive. She stopped at the end of Joe’s driveway and sat there until Jack started chewing on the file folder beside of him. “Stop that, Jack.” She picked up the file and put it on the dashboard. She turned right onto the road in a daze. Jack decided to sit up and look out the windows. She said to Jack “I have a brother.”

Pearl looked at her watch as she drove towards the trailer and knew that the girls would still be asleep. She didn’t want to see them or talk to them. She pulled into the parking lot of a gas station to think where she could go. She knew Maddie had been too distracted with her work and didn’t want to bother her. Then she remembered she had a date with Sam at noon. She knew she was not in a state of mind to go out, even though she had looked forward to the day. She wondered if Sam would mind changing the plans, go to the park, and walk. Perhaps they

could go on a hike at Morrow Mountain. She pulled onto the road to her trailer determined to call from her trailer without waking the girls. They always slept late on Sundays so she was sure she could get in and out of the house before they got up.

When she arrived at the trailer, she picked Jack up, entered the house and moved with stealth to her bedroom. She placed him on her bed to keep him quiet but could see this puzzled him so she picked him up to hold him while she dialed Sam's number. The phone rang several times before Sam picked up. Jack wiggled out of Pearl's arms at the same time, but he was still quiet.

"Hello?" yawned Sam. Pearl had forgotten that Sam slept later.

"Hey. This is Pearl."

"Are you okay?" Sam was more alert.

"Yes, well, maybe. Is there any chance..."

"Please don't cancel on me," pleaded Sam.

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Pearl blushed as she asked "Actually, I was calling to see if I could come to your house and talk to you about something that's happened."

There was silence at the other end of the phone. "Sam."

"I'm here. I would be honored for you to come here. Do you want

to talk now?”

“No. I want to get out of the house before the girls get up. Do you mind if I bring Jack?”

“Of course not. Why don’t you bring a bag and stay the night?”

“Okay. Give me directions.” Pearl jotted down the directions and hung up the phone. It was only at that time that it registered with her that Sam had asked her to spend the night. She hurriedly started to pack a bag with every nerve in her body shaking. It was all too much to take in. She decided she wouldn’t spend the night at Sam’s since she had to work in the morning. She stopped packing, took deep breaths to steady her hand to write a note, and escaped from the trailer with the dog.

This time Jack was excited about being in the truck. Pearl had to laugh at him as he raced to the passenger window and back to her. “All right, calm down now.” She leaned across the truck and rolled the window down just far enough that he could smell the scents but not jump out the window. The morning was cool and fresh, a harbinger of the spring to come. She was too addled from all that happened that morning and almost had a wreck when she pulled out in front of another car. Slowing down, she took deep breaths and turned on the radio. She found WDAV to see if some classical music would calm her.

There was a Presbyterian church service on, so she turned the radio to an easy listening station. The last thing she needed was to hear words of condemnation, though she realized she didn't know much about Presbyterians.

Jack got bored, moved over to cuddle against her thigh and fell asleep. Pearl rolled her window down to breathe in more of the fresh air. Her emotions were in turmoil. Her mind confused. This was not how she wanted to spend her day with Sam. She should have cancelled and thought about turning around to go back to the trailer. Then she remembered Susan and Rachel would be there. As much as she had grown to love them, she did not want to see them today. She needed a different place. She needed Sam and her arms. She looked at her watch. Sam said it would take about thirty minutes to get to her house in the Richfield area. She was approaching Richfield. The area had not

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changed that much since she and Sam were younger. Stanly County was far enough from Charlotte that it changed slower than Cabarrus County changed. As she crossed the railroad tracks, her heart started racing. If she got through this day without a heart attack, she would feel lucky.

She turned left on Gold Branch Road and crossed over Stokes Ferry.

She stopped to check her map because she wondered if she was on the right road. When she found Reeves Island Road, she was surprised that it was so close to a Lake. She turned into Sam's drive and turned off the truck. Jack woke up and ran back and forth between his window and Pearl. He was ready to get out. "Okay, okay. Here goes nothing."

Pearl put Jack's leash on him and they got out of the truck.

"Glad you could make it," Sam's voice came from the back corner of the house. She was standing at the wooden gate to the back yard.

Pearl moved shyly as Jack tugged at the leash, happy to make a new friend. Sam allowed Pearl to approach in her own time; then opened the gate to allow Pearl and Jack inside. The yard was landscaped and a stone path neatly led down to another gate. Beyond that gate, Pearl could see a dock and a boat. The morning was bright and still as the two women stood quietly while the puppy squirmed and pulled at the leash. Sam laughed.

"You can let him off the leash. The fence is secure because I have cats that come outside."

Pearl let Jack off the leash and he began to run around the yard excited about all the smells. He ran to smell a bush and then ran back to Pearl. He jumped up on Sam. They both laughed at the puppy antics.

Pearl could feel Sam's eyes on her and she looked up as Sam said, "I'm glad you're here."

"Me too," replied Pearl.

Sam reached for her hand and pulled her towards the house. "Come on and let me show you the house." Sam let go of Pearl's hand to open the sliding glass door. Jack heard the commotion and ran as fast as his puppy legs could run to make sure he wasn't left behind. Pearl bent to pick him up before he could run in the house and terrorize the cats.

"Don't worry about my cats." said Sam. "They are bigger than him and he will learn not to mess with them. I had a dog before so they know how to take care of themselves." Jack wiggled to get out of

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Pearl's arms as if he understood Sam's words. As she bent to set him down, Pearl's head swirled with dizziness and she lost her balance.

"Woah. Can we just sit down for a moment?"

"Of course." Sam took her arm gently to lead her to the couch. She saw Pearl wobble and was concerned. "Are you okay?"

"No. I'm not." They both sat on the couch and forgot about the puppy.

"Tell me all about it." Sam sat with loving attentiveness beside

Pearl.

“I don’t know where to begin...” Pearl spoke from her numbness.

When Sam put her arm around her, she broke down and cried. Sam wrapped both arms around her and let her cry until there were no more tears.

§

When Rachel and Susan finally woke up, Susan was surprised to find that Pearl was gone. Susan checked the answering machine. Pearl left a message saying she had gone to a friend’s for the day. She didn’t know why she was surprised, because Pearl was kind and friendly, but she had not heard of any special friend besides Maddie since living with Pearl. After puzzling a moment, she then became excited at the thought of time at home with Rachel. Then she thought to call Josh, who was not up yet. Susan left a message with Joe to have Josh come to the trailer when he got up. They could have a nice afternoon together and maybe some time for romance when Rachel took a nap. Just thinking of having time to herself alone with Josh made her wish that she had her own room for privacy.

“Mommy, waffles?” Rachel’s request for breakfast brought her out of her thoughts.

“Sure, we can have waffles sweetie.” She opened the freezer and



popped two waffles into the toaster. “Josh is going to come over to the house today. What do you think about that?”

“Joshie!” Rachel exclaimed and performed a little happy dance with her teddy bear hugged tight under her left arm. “Dance, mommy.”

The two of them danced in the late morning sunlight. The waffles popped up, but were still frozen, so Susan pressed the toasted button down again. Rachel ran down the hall to find Pearl. When she returned,

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she asked “Where’s Nana?” She ran to the back door and gasped with a look of surprise on her face. “Where’s Jack? Huhh. He’s gone!”

“They went for a ride today.” Susan laughed at the silly look on Rachel’s face. The waffles popped up again. Susan took wooden tongs to get them out of the toaster, put them on a small plate, and slathered them with butter. She poured syrup over the waffles and cut the waffles up for Rachel. Susan’s thoughts were on her own parents now. She wanted Rachel to know her real grandmother. She took a bite of one of the waffles before handing it to Rachel. While Rachel was eating, Susan decided to call her parents to say hello. As she walked away from the table, Rachel complained,

“Mommy, you forgot to pray.”

“Right. Go ahead.” Susan stood still where she was but Rachel demanded that she return to the table. “Okay. Pray.”

“Bow your head.” When Susan had struck the proper prayerful position, Rachel began “God is great...”

Susan had to smile. Rachel was a spiritual child, just like Susan’s sister. Susan knew she had to reconnect with her sister too. They had only lost touch since November. Surely, her parents would know how to reach her. As Susan returned to call home (was it really home if they didn’t want her), she thought it odd that the heterosexual child was turned away but the homosexual child was finally accepted. Maybe that meant her parents would accept her now that she had gotten on better footing and was no longer involved with a bad boy. She smiled at the thought of Josh as she dialed the number. Josh looked like a bad boy but he wasn’t one. He felt perfect for Susan.

“Hello, this is Margaret.” Her mother’s voice was formal and cold causing Susan to hesitate and consider hanging up the phone. “Hello, is anyone there?”

“Um, hi Mom. This is Susan.” Now the pause was on the other end of the line. “Just thought I would call and catch up with you.”

“How are you?” Again, her mother was formal with a twist of disinterest.

“We’re doing good. Rachel and I...”

“Here’s your father.” Susan rolled her eyes at her mother as she listened to the receiver being handed away. Her mother said something she could not hear. It was clear one of them had covered the mouthpiece of the phone.

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“Susie?” Susan smiled at the sound of her father’s voice.

“Hi, dad! How are you?” Susan swallowed hard. It had been too long.

“I’m great now that I’ve heard from you. I tried finding you before Christmas but you were gone and that boyfriend of yours was gone as well. Are you okay? I started to report you as missing to the police but I thought that might be a bit much.” He sounded breathless.

“I’m the best I’ve been in a long time, dad. Sorry I didn’t let you know. You know how things have been with mom. More crap happened and I couldn’t face either of you.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“Not right now. I only wanted to hear your voice and see if I could bring Rachel over to meet you and mom. She needs to know you both. I mean you are her grandparents and ... I miss you.”

“Of course, you can come over any time.” Susan heard comments in the background and then a muffling as her dad covered the phone mouthpiece again. The mumbling sounded like arguing. “Sorry, honey. Your mother has invited guests and they shall be arriving shortly. Can I have a number where I can call you back?”

“Sure. I’m staying with a lovely woman who has been a blessing to me and Rachel.” Susan gave him the number. He promised he would call back and Susan knew from the tone of his voice that he meant he would call back when her mom wasn’t in the same room. Her dad didn’t care who she dated or slept with, he only wanted a relationship with his girls. “I love you too, dad.” She hung up the phone and felt a weight lift from her shoulders. While she did not enjoy talking with her mom, she had to admit she had missed her too.

Rachel walked to the sink, stood on her tiptoes to wash the syrup from her hands. Susan smiled as Rachel stepped up on the small stool Pearl had bought for her, squirted soap in her hands, and then awkwardly turned on the water. Susan knew that if she could make sure that her mom saw Rachel first, all would be well between them. Rachel was an angel. As she stood on her tippy toes to rinse her hands, the stool teetered. Susan walked behind Rachel to make sure she didn’t fall and caressed the curls lit by sunlight. She helped Rachel hop down

to dry her hands, and then sent her in to watch her morning cartoons. Looking at the clock, Susan saw it was close to eleven and wondered if she should perhaps take Rachel to church some Sunday since she had a spiritual nature. Susan never cared much for church but her sister

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had always loved the music and worship. Thinking of church made her nervous. She knew she had time to decide. It was too late for today.

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*“The King of Love My Shepherd Is,”* was one of Maddie’s favorite hymns. She was glad to see it listed in the bulletin. The first time she had ever heard the hymn was the first Sunday that she attended the Lutheran church. “Love and mercy, that’s what it’s all about,” she thought. During the announcements, Maddie was excited to hear that softball practice would start next Sunday. She would have everything ready for her show. Now she would have time to play. Maddie wondered if Pearl might like to play with them this year. Pearl was once a great first-baseman. She would stop by and talk to Pearl after worship. Pearl might not appreciate that a requirement to be on St. John’s Team would be to attend church ten percent of the time during the season. But it wouldn’t hurt to ask, even if Maddie knew that Pearl

was mad at the church.

The pastor led the confession and the congregation passed the peace to each other, each person speaking a warm greeting to everyone within reach. Maddie was caught up in memories of when she was mad at the church, so she only greeted those around her this time. She watched the others as they hugged and smiled at each other. It was that community of love that had eventually brought her back to church. Still, it was hard for many years after Maddie first came out to her family and friends. The weight of the judgment of her mother's congregation still ripped through her heart. Maddie looked out the glass windows while the organist played the intro to the first hymn. The congregation started singing while Maddie sat, lost in her thoughts. Why is it that a person can be wounded so quickly, but the healing seems to take forever?

The service seemed to drag on since Maddie was focused on her hurt. She was glad there wasn't communion on that day so that she could escape to Pearl's house. She was hugged by some of the ball players as she snuck out the back door. The coach smiled a big smile to hear that she was returning to play second base. Even though people here were glad to see her, the pain from the past darkened the beauty

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of the day. She raced to Pearl's so that she would not have to be alone today.

When Maddie pulled up to Pearl's trailer, she was disappointed to see that her truck was gone. Knowing Pearl, she had run out to get something special to make for Susan and Rachel's lunch. She knocked on the door in case the girls were still sleeping. Susan answered the door and looked so good, it made Maddie stand a little taller.

"Hey, is Pearl coming back?"

"Come on in, Maddie. You didn't have to knock you know." Susan pushed the screen door outward and Maddie walked in. As Maddie passed her, she noticed that she also smelled yummy.

"You look mighty nice." Maddie hoped she didn't sound like a lecherous lesbian. She put her hands in her pockets to make sure she didn't accidentally touch her.

"Thanks. Pearl is off with a friend so I invited Josh to come over."

"A friend?"

"That's what the note said." Susan reached behind Maddie and handed her the note with the phone number listed on it. "I didn't recognize the number."

"Hmm. I don't recognize it either. Mind if I copy it? I wanted to

ask Pearl something before I forgot.” Maddie also wanted to make sure Pearl was okay. She knew that Pearl had been communicating with Sam, but it wasn’t like Pearl to run off like that.

“No problem. Do you want to stay and have lunch with us?” Susan was sincere in her offer, but also had hoped for a meal with just Josh and Rachel.

“Nah. I’ve got other things to do today. Hope you have a great afternoon.” Maddie scooted out the door, but before Susan closed it behind her, she turned back. “Susan, if you and Josh ever need um...time alone, let me know and I can stay here with Pearl and Rachel.” She paused with a matter of fact look on her face.

“Thanks Maddie, that’s thoughtful. See ya.” Susan hurried to close the door hoping that Maddie had not seen how red her face had been at the suggestion. God, it had been too long since she had been alone with a man. She hoped she didn’t attack Josh when he walked into the trailer. She could feel that other parts of her body had heated up at the mere suggestion of time alone with Josh. She leaned against the door savoring the sexy feelings flowing through her body.



Sam tried to answer the phone before it awakened Pearl. She had laid down to nap after the long cry. Sam was still unsure what was wrong. Pearl had babbled and held a folder in her hand while talking. Some of the talk was about their past and something that Joe had said to Pearl had upset her this morning.

“Hello.” Sam said softly.

“May I speak to Pearl?”

“She’s sleeping right now. May I take a message?” Sam heard the pause at the end of the phone that seemed puzzled. “My name’s Sam, by the way. I’m an old friend of Pearl’s.”

“Oh Sam,” Maddie was relieved “I’m Maddie. Pearl left a note, but I wanted to make sure she’s okay.”

“Well, she’s upset about something. She didn’t talk much and when she did she was so quiet I couldn’t understand much. When she finally stopped crying she was so exhausted she fell asleep on my couch. I’m letting her sleep.”

“Did she bring Jack with her?”

“Yeah. He’s out in the back-yard chewing on a stick.” Sam chuckled as she watched the puppy try to toss the stick for himself. “I think he’s trying to convince me to come out there with him.”

“Do I need to do anything for Pearl?” Maddie was concerned

because crying was not a natural reaction for Pearl.

“Not that I know of, but if I can get your number just in case I need to call you.” For the first time Sam realized that Pearl was not the same young woman she had fallen in love with all the years before. She was still beautiful as an older woman, but lots of water had flowed under the bridges of their lives. They would need to start over. Sam hoped she had not gone crazy over the years. “Thanks for calling, Maddie. I’ll let her know you called.”

“No. Don’t say anything.” Maddie chuckled. “She might think I’m checking up on her.”

“You are, aren’t you?” Sam smiled.

“Yeah, but she might not appreciate knowing I called you right now.” Maddie felt like she had butted into Pearl’s personal life, but what did she expect? It was the first time Pearl had ever had a personal

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life that didn’t include Maddie. “I hope to meet you someday Sam. I’ve heard wonderful things about you.”

“Thank you. I’ve heard wonderful things about you too. I look forward to your show at Rowan University.”

“Thank you. Bye!” When Maddie hung up, she was happy for Pearl

and at the same time, felt a little sad. Everybody was hooking up in some way but her. She wondered where she had left that phone number for Leah.

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“Who was that?” Pearl sat up, groggy and yawning.

“Nobody to worry about.” Sam walked over to the brown leather couch and sat on the matching ottoman near Pearl’s shoulder. “Feeling a little better?”

“Um-hm. Sorry about the tears.” Pearl felt bashful suddenly.

“Where’s my Jack?” Pearl sat up and moved a little further away from Sam. She could feel electricity coming from Sam and wasn’t quite ready for it.

“He’s out there throwing a stick around.” She turned and pointed to Jack who threw the stick as if on cue and then flopped down to chew on one end. The two sat quietly together watching the puppy play. Sam turned back and watched Pearl for a moment before asking “Would you like something to drink?”

“A glass of ice water would be nice.” While Sam went to get the water, Pearl folded up the Navajo blanket and set it at the other end of the couch. She felt awkward and out of place in Sam’s fancy house. She thought she would never be able to invite Sam to the trailer and

that made her sad. As Sam came back to the couch, she handed Pearl the water and said,

“Penny for your thoughts.” Sam sat back on the ottoman, giving Pearl enough space to think.

“Just thinking what a lovely house you have.” She sipped on her glass of water and looked down the hall.

“Would you like that tour now?”

“Sure.” Pearl took another sip and looked for a coaster. Sam stood and walked to the bookshelf. She was strong and athletic. Even at her age, Sam still had nice muscular legs and a firm butt. Pearl looked down

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at the floor before Sam turned back around. She felt jittery and her hand shook enough to make the ice clink against the glass.

“Here you go.” Sam set the coaster on the end table beside Pearl.

“No need to be nervous, girly. It’s just me.”

“It’s been an interesting day, is all.” Pearl took another sip and then set the glass on the coaster, praying she didn’t tip it over. She wiped her palms on her jeans and stood up. She noticed that Sam was keeping a nice distance between them so she figured she was nervous too. They heard clicking at the glass door and saw Jack scratching to come in the

house. “Do you mind if he comes in?”

“Of course not.” Sam took one step to the door and let Jack in, then she held out her left hand in a gentlemanly gesture. “After you, my dear.”

Pearl stepped around the couch into the area between the living room and kitchen. Sam smiled at Pearl’s shyness and realized she would have to take the lead. “This is, of course, the kitchen. You can help yourself when you’re here. In fact, I’ve been praying you would come out here and cook something up for me. I only do grilling. Thought I would make you a steak since you’re here.”

“That would be nice.” Pearl couldn’t remember the last time she’d had a steak.

“Great. I have prime rib, filet mignon, and a few rib eyes.” Sam rubbed her hands together and opened the door to the refrigerator. “I didn’t know which you preferred.”

“Filet mignon would be great.” Pearl could feel that her eyes were large with surprise and delight. She realized she was very hungry too. She turned her wrist up to see the time. “What time is it? I forgot my watch.” She looked around for a clock while absentmindedly rubbing her wrist.

“I don’t know. I keep my clocks in the study.” Sam pulled out some

steak packages and put them in the freezer. “I’ll save these steaks for the next time you come. It’s probably around two o’clock. We’ll hurry through the house and then we can make lunch.” Pearl turned to go out of the kitchen and Sam gently directed her by placing her hand in the small of her back. The electricity flowed between them again. At least Pearl hoped Sam could feel it too. She turned to Sam and their eyes met and locked. Sam moved her hand quickly, looked down at the floor, and started down the hall. Now she was nervous.

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“This is the guest room. You can stay in here if you like.” Sam stood in the doorway while Pearl peeked inside. The room was large with several Van Gogh prints around the room. “There’s a half bath with this room.” Sam moved to the next room. “This is my study here on the back corner.” The room was painted dark green and trimmed in white. Dark cherry wood bookcases filled one of the walls. There were French Doors leading out to the back porch and a large window above Sam’s desk. Pearl wanted to sit in this room and drink in the colors and the smell. She could tell Sam spent most of her time in the study, because it was full of her scent. “That’s a piano I bought because of its color. It’s actually mahogany but when I turn the light on,” she turned

on the piano light “it shows red like the cherry furniture. Lucky for me it plays like a dream.”

“I didn’t remember your playing piano.”

“It’s probably because I never played for you. It wasn’t cool back then to be a jock and play piano. But I got tough enough not to care what the other jocks thought.” Sam turned the light off on the piano and looked at Pearl. “You like it?”

“Yes, of course. It’s all beautiful.” She lingered in the study as Sam went to the next room.

“This is the master bedroom.” When Pearl stepped into the room she was flooded with emotions. On the wall over the bed was a large print of Georgia O’Keefe’s “Black Iris”.

“You still have it?” Pearl remembered the two of them buying that same painting after declaring their love to one another. They had been planning to rent an apartment.

“Yes.” They both stood looking at the print, looking new and alive.

They did not touch or move. Years of desire and love lost moved around the room. Finally, Sam cleared her throat “Better get the grill started. You finish looking around while I fire it up.”

Pearl walked into the large bathroom and was delighted that all the colors were her favorite jewel toned colors. There was an open shower

with no curtains, only a curved glass wall, taller than the average person. Behind the glass wall, Pearl discovered a Jacuzzi. Both the bedroom and bath were filled with light and curves. She remembered that part of the house was round from the outside. She sat down on the bed to dream about living in such a home one day. She heard Sam and Jack come back into the house and hurried to the hall. She could

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not hope for such goodness. She smoothed her hair and took a deep breath as she walked towards the kitchen.

“Do you have the makings for a salad?” She asked.

“In the fridge.” Sam was playing tug of war with Jack. “Would you like some wine?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t had any...in a while and will have to get back before dark.”

“Oh.” Sam slackened her hand from the game with Jack. “I had hoped you would stay.” She looked up with a pleading face. “You can stay in the guest room. I’ve looked for you since I returned here. Never expected to find you.” Jack jumped on Sam trying to get her to play harder. She looked down at him as she said, “I was especially surprised to find that you never married.”



“It’s a long story.” Pearl clasped her hands in front of her and sat down on the couch.

“I’ve got time.” Sam’s eyes were kind and her voice conveyed patience.

“We’ll see. I’d better make that salad.” Pearl slapped her thighs and stood up.

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Josh didn’t arrive at the trailer until after one o’clock. When he saw Susan dressed in a beautiful navy-blue dress, his eyebrows went up in delight. He couldn’t move at first. She was striking.

“Are you coming in or are you going to stand out there and gawk?”

Susan laughed playfully.

“I’m not sure.” Josh chuckled. “It seems I might be late for lunch.”

“Get in here.” She opened the door and kissed him on the lips, lingering a bit longer than usual. He felt giddy as he stepped into the trailer.

“Joshie!” Rachel ran to hug him.

Josh picked Rachel up “My aren’t you and your mommy all dressed up. What’s the occasion?”

“No occasion. Just wanted you to see that we can clean up.”

“I wish I had known and I would have dressed accordingly.” Josh’s eyes were glistening with happiness.

“I think you look great, as always. Have a seat.”

“I’ve got some wine in the car if you’d like.”

“Perhaps after you-know-who naps?”

“Wonderful.”

“Mommy, I don’t like this dress.” Rachel started to undress in front of Josh.

“Oh no you don’t!” Susan scooped Rachel up and struggled with her down the hall. “Be right back. Make yourself at home.” When they returned, Rachel was dressed in jeans, a tee shirt, and small tennis shoes. “What a tom-boy!” Susan exclaimed.

“Glad you like dresses.” Josh smiled appreciatively.

“I’m glad I have a chance to wear one for a change.” She twirled a bit as she went to the kitchen. She hoped Josh could appreciate her figure. She liked feeling him looking at her. She turned back to him and leaned over the counter. “Would you like some tea? The roast should be done in a moment.”

“Tea sounds good.” Josh crossed his legs on the couch. Rachel was lying on her stomach in front of the television again.

“Thanks for coming over.” Susan crooned. She knew it as soon as she said it and hoped she didn’t sound needy. It was so nice for the three of them to be at home, together. She and Josh stared at each other for a moment. He responded,

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“My pleasure.”

Susan shivered and turned to take the roast out of the oven.

Rachel fell asleep on the table before she had finished eating. Susan wiped her mouth tenderly and lifted her out of the chair. “Be right back,” she whispered. Josh nodded and kept eating. After putting Rachel to bed, Susan freshened up her face and returned to the table. Josh was still eating.

“Does Pearl know you can cook this good?”

“Where do you think I’m learning to cook?”

“Didn’t know if your mom taught you or not.”

“My mom hasn’t cooked a day in my life. Are you about done?”

She took her finger, dipped it into the gravy on his plate and then licked it off. She was naturally sensual and did not realize how suggestive the move was to Josh.

“Done. How about that bottle of wine?”

“Sounds great. I’ll clean up while you get some glasses poured.”

Susan looked for wine glasses but only found jelly jars. She knew Josh wouldn’t mind. Josh helped her with the dishes to hurry the process along. As they sat on the couch, they were both filled with glee and at the same time aware that there was a sleeping child in the house. Josh held his glass of wine, wondering what would come next. Susan curled up on the couch and put her feet under her. As she did, Josh could see that she had no hose on and wondered of the surprises under her dress. He took a swallow of his wine.

“Hmm.” Susan purred. “Looks like someone is nervous.”

“I guess I am.” Josh leaned back and relaxed at this admission. “I’ve never dated someone with a child.”

“Guess you’ll have to learn to take it slower.” Susan sipped the wine in slow luxury. With her left hand, she began to caress his neck. She moved closer. Josh could feel her warmth and smell her clean body. He leaned closer to her. Smiling as he leaned closer still to kiss her.

“This could be fun.”

“And don’t forget sexy,” Susan moved to kiss behind his ear while he kissed her neck.

§

Pearl and Sam prepared the meal and continued to catch up on years gone by. There was comfort and peace. They ate mostly in silence and the joy of being in the same place and time together. They cleaned up afterward in companionable movements as though they had lived together for years. As dusk approached, Pearl wanted to linger but was also concerned about imposing. She swirled the wine in her glass trying to make the last linger long enough to discern whether she was wanted. Sam seemed to sense her thoughts “Please stay, Pearl.” She gently touched Pearl’s hand. They gazed into each other’s eyes and Pearl nodded yes. “I have a few things in the truck.” She drank the last of her wine and walked slowly to the truck with Jack bounding behind her. The March night was cold. Pearl wished she had brought a coat with her. She grabbed her bag and told Jack to hurry to do his business. She shuddered after she stepped back in the house. Sam was wiping down the oak table and looked up as Pearl came back into the house. “I’ll build a fire while you put your things in the guest room.” Sam seemed energized. “Come on Jack. Help me get some firewood.” Jack bounced to Sam. Before the two were out the door, Pearl asked “Do you mind if I call Susan and let her know I won’t be back to the trailer tonight? Staying out in the evening is really not like me.” Pearl bowed

her head in shyness. Her heart beat frantically inside at the thought of this adventure.

“Pearl,” Sam stepped from the door, walked closer to Pearl, put her hand under Pearl’s chin, and tilted her head up to meet her eyes “you can do whatever you want here. You are welcome here.” Longing flowed between the old lovers. Sam thought to kiss Pearl but did not want to frighten her. Jack jumped at the door. Sam turned reluctantly away “I’m coming, you bossy pup.” Sam laughed “I thought the cats were bad.”

Pearl put her small bag into the guest bedroom and called Susan. It was only five o’clock Susan had told her. She didn’t ask nosey questions, just made sure Pearl was okay. She could hear Josh and Rachel playing in the background and she was happy for Susan.

“Susan, if you need to use my bedroom, it’s okay.” There was an awkward silence. “Just make sure to change the sheets if you do.” They laughed nervously and ended the conversation.

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As Pearl walked back into the living room, she felt chilled again. She was rubbing her arms as she sat down. Sam had placed the logs into the grate, then shooed Jack off the hearth. Sam dusted the

woodchips off her hands and pants. After lighting the fire, she swept up the debris on the floor then looked at Pearl. Pearl looked at home here. She also looked cold.

“How about something to warm you up? I have limoncello or Drambuie. I’m out of whiskey.”

“I don’t know what any of that is. How about a sweater?”

“Be right back.” In a flash, Sam was back with a soft sweatshirt for Pearl. “I’m still a jock so I don’t have sweaters. This new sweatshirt is too warm for me. If it fits, you can have it. I’ve only worn it twice.”

Sam handed the sweatshirt to Pearl and then moved to the kitchen.

“I’ll bring the Drambuie and limoncello for you to try. It’s okay if you don’t like either.”

While Sam was in the kitchen Pearl started to put the sweatshirt on and was embraced by Sam’s scent. She stood and walked to the fireplace. She pulled the sweatshirt up and was flooded with memories of the two of them together from the past. Strange how Sam’s scent was the same as Pearl had remembered, it was the scent of the outdoors, pine, and musk. She was still smelling of the sweatshirt when Sam came back into the room. Sam set a tray with cordials and two bottles on the coffee table.

“If you don’t like these, we also have decaf coffee.” Sam was puffed

up with happiness.

“What do the two of them taste like? I’m guessing the limoncello is lemon flavored?”

“Correct on the limoncello. Drambuie has a licorice taste to me.”

“I hate licorice so I’ll try the limoncello. No need for me to taste the other. Wouldn’t want to spit on your pretty floor.” Pearl winked at Sam. She could see the wink affected Sam because her face reddened. She couldn’t see that Sam’s knees weakened and threatened to drop her at Pearl’s feet.

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§

Susan was annoyed that Rachel did not want to sleep. Of all the nights that she was wired. She hoped that Josh had not given her a sip of his Mello Yellow or that would be the end of their night alone. Josh had gone to check on his dad for the evening. She knew he was also going to find a cool way of avoiding a discussion with Joe. Joe knew the two were dating, but they had not been alone or intimate, other than kissing on the couch. It always seemed that Joe, or Pearl was around. Rachel was a consistent presence. Susan realized she needed her sister more than ever. As she thought about her sister, her



frustration with Rachel waned. She twirled Rachel's hair and kissed her rosy cheeks. The love Susan felt for Rachel soothed her to sleep.

She grabbed some clean undies from her drawer and quietly left for Pearl's room. As she walked into the room, she felt that she was trespassing even though she knew Pearl meant what she said. Susan turned the shower on in the bathroom and waited for the water to warm. She knew she would have done this even if Pearl had not given her blessing. She needed a man in a bad way and Josh was perfect for her...at least she hoped she was right this time. She began to think of a life with Josh in their own place and then spoke aloud "Stop that right now!" She took the shower quickly. She had forgotten a towel but knew Pearl was always clean so she grabbed the one on the rack. As she dried her body off she looked for a mirror. How odd that Pearl did not have a mirror in the bathroom.

As she dried her hair, she turned on the fan to take away the steam and walked into Pearl's bedroom to search for a mirror there. Nothing. "How is she always so neat when she can't even see her hair in a mirror," Susan mumbled as she walked back to the sink. She hung the towel up and looked under the sink to see if there was a hand mirror. Nothing. She walked back into the bedroom but could not bring herself to search through more of Pearl's personal items. "Guess Josh

will have to deal with me au natural.” She wished she could walk around this place naked like she always did in her own place. She thought about following through with her idea and then changed her mind. Sure enough, if she walked around like that Pearl would come home instead of Josh. Josh as home. Her entire being tingled. Her sexuality was sizzling. She pulled on her jeans and the thin tee shirt. She could be naked underneath when Josh arrived. She raked her

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hands through her curly hair and wondered how much longer she would have to wait.

§

Maddie had run into Rick at lunch. They walked around Concord Mall chatting for a time and ended up discussing the new lesbian in town. When they both realized that Leah was one and the same person, Rick told Maddie where she lived. Maddie didn’t want to show up on her doorstep unannounced, so at three she called the number Rick had for Leah. No answer and she decided not to leave a message. She wanted to talk to Leah directly, hear her voice and see if her voice gave any indication of interest. She called several times, and no answer. Maddie felt that there was chemistry between them, but also their

meeting felt like destiny, a destiny for home and long-term love.

By the time it was dusk, she thought she would get a cherry-lemon Sundrop at What-A-Burger and then take a walk past the Berringer place where Leah lived. She decided to take Tucker with her. Women always loved little dogs. If nothing else, the puppy could be a distraction from awkwardness. By the time Maddie had walked to Leah's apartment, she was confident that the night was going to turn in her favor. She and Tucker moseyed across the street. Tucker pranced as if he knew something good was going to happen too. On the porch, Maddie stooped to pick Tucker up so the puppy's cute face would be near hers. "Here goes nothing Tucker. Looks like our lady is in tonight." The light from the window glowed warmly though Maddie could not see inside the apartment.

Maddie stepped into the house's old parlor and knocked at the first door. She hoped Rick had told her the right apartment. Still, there were only three in the old house. She would knock until she found her. As Maddie looked upstairs to see if those lights were on there, the door opened. She turned around and Leah looked confused at first. Her face broke into a gorgeous smile as she recognized Maddie.

"Madsen, right? Or Maddie."

"Right. Maddie." Maddie smiled like a fool.

“And who is this cutie?” Leah’s voice was lyrical, rich, and distinctly feminine. Her perfume reached its arms around Maddie, arousing her. She cleared her throat to focus.

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“This is Tucker.” They both smiled at the dog as he gave his happy greetings to Leah.

“I ran into Rick and he said you had moved into town. Me and Tucker were out and wanted to say hello.”

“Wonderful. Come on in.” Leah was glad that they had cleaned her apartment today and wished she had bought more wine. “Now Tucker, you must be aware that my cat, Ms. Cookies, could eat you for a snack, so be good.”

“I’ll probably hold on to him for now. He hasn’t met a cat yet and I’m not sure what he’ll do.” Maddie’s heart was full to bursting.

As they stepped into the small den area, another voice spoke. “Who is it, darling?”

“This is Maddie.” Leah spoke with delight. When Kat and Maddie saw each other, the room immediately froze. Tucker barked, knowing something was wrong with Maddie. Kat tried to act debonair.

“Oh, yes. Maddie.” She looked down to wipe the kitchen counter

“We know each other from a while back.”

“Small world.” Maddie tried not to allow the loathing to coat her voice. Disappointment fought with hatred of Kat, fought with fear for Leah. She smiled glibly. “Well Leah, just wanted to welcome you to our little town. I better get back home.” She turned to leave. Tucker whined because she had squeezed him a bit in her anger at Kat. “Sorry, bud,” Maddie whispered to Tucker and kissed his little head. It was hard not to be rude and storm out of the apartment. She turned back to Leah “Sorry to have interrupted you two.” Maddie looked into Leah’s eyes to see what lay there. She seemed to see disappointment. Leah placed her hand on Maddie’s elbow, then pulled back.

“You don’t have to leave. We were going to have a glass of wine. Please join us.”

“Thanks. I’ve got things to do. Nice seeing you.” Maddie turned and walked out the door. Leah followed her to the porch, confused as to what had happened in the living room. As Maddie set the dog down to walk back to the car, Leah called to her.

“I hope you two will stop by again.”

Maddie walked on as though she had not heard her, but said under her breath “Not taking a chance on running into that bitch again. Forget that.” She shook her head and could feel Tucker watching her timidly.

“It’s okay boy. I’m not mad at you.” When they reached the opposing

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sidewalk, she squatted down to pet him. “It’s good between you and me boy. I’m glad I’ve got you little man.”

Leah folded her arms and watched the exchange between Maddie and her dog, puzzled as never before. She thought to herself that if Maddie was that rude to her friends, she wasn’t sure she wanted to be friends. At the same time, as she walked back into her apartment, she was saddened as though she lost someone she had known for a lifetime. She shook her head as if she could shake her mind free from Maddie and went back for her glass of wine.

§

“Pearl, tell me something.”

“What?”

“How often do you drink?” Sam was serious in her question.

“Well, I drank at Christmas.”

“Ah, so your system is not accustomed to it.” Sam reached for Pearl’s cordial, took it to the kitchen and poured it out.

“Why did you do that? I kinda like that stuff.” Pearl blinked her eyes to clear them.

“I know. You drank the first glass too quickly. That should have been my first tip. I think you’ve had enough for now.” Sam sat on the couch beside Pearl and put her arm over Pearl’s shoulder. Pearl leaned into her.

“I do feel a bit woozie.” Pearl leaned her head against Sam’s shoulder, close to the warmth of her neck. Pearl’s head began to swim. She wasn’t sure if it was from the alcohol or the smell of Sam’s scent. She began to kiss Sam’s neck tender and slow. She was embarrassed when Sam pulled away and took her hands.

“Pearl. Let me get one thing straight. Now look me in the eyes.”

Pearl looked up at her but she could feel the heat in her cheeks from embarrassment. “Don’t be embarrassed. I want this as much as you. I’m not going to take it this way though.”

“What do you mean?” Pearl pulled her hands back, then brushed her hair back with her left hand.

“You’ve got a buzz from the alcohol. I want you to be totally present to me when you kiss me.”

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“I understand, but how do I get there from here?” Pearl’s head started to feel fuzzier. She realized she was suddenly very tired and that

she did not want to go to work tomorrow, did not want to face Joe.

“It’s only six, so we can drink water, tea, or coffee and continue to catch up. If you still feel romantic later, we can see where that leads.”

Sam sat very still as though afraid that Pearl would run.

Instead, Pearl leaned back on the couch, rested her head back, and looked at the ceiling for a long, quiet, moment. Sam didn’t move. Then Pearl kept her head back on the couch but turned to Sam. Sam wouldn’t meet her eyes at first and Pearl was glad because she could look at the outline of the handsome face she had missed. Pearl reached over and caressed her strong jawbone till Sam looked at her. They held the gaze for a time till Pearl spoke again.

“Thank you.” Pearl’s heart opened to all the love she felt for Sam and had hidden through the years.

“For what?” Sam took Pearl’s hand and kissed it lightly. She then clasped the hand in both of hers.

“For being patient. For looking for me. For having me here. There are so many things I’m grateful for right now.”

“I can’t believe I finally found you.”

“I must admit I don’t ever want to leave your side again.” Pearl’s heart ached at the thought of going back to her trailer ever, but she knew she could not ask to stay at Sam’s; at least not yet. “Hey, can I



use your phone?” Pearl gingerly sat up on the edge of the couch and pulled her hand back.

“Sure. The closest one is in the kitchen.”

“Be right back.” Pearl stood up too fast and wobbled. “Woo. That stuff packs a punch, doesn’t it?” She waved off Sam’s offer of assistance. “I’m okay. I’ll be right back.” Pearl felt a turning in her stomach for what she was about to do. She had never taken such a risk. When she got to the phone, she took a deep breath and dialed Joe’s number. “Joe.”

“Yes.”

“This is Pearl.”

“Good. Are you okay?”

“I’m not sure. I need some time to think. I’m taking tomorrow off.”

“What?” Pearl could hear the panic in Joe’s voice as his breathing changed. “You can’t do this to me! You know I can’t go in and run the place!”

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“Joe. I’m not quitting, just asking for ONE more day off. I’ve been teaching Susan to cook. Call her.”

“I’m not taking a chance on Susan till I know she can cook.”

“Fine. Then close the store. You’ve done it before.”

“I can’t close Pearl.”

“Of course, you can. I’ll handle it when I’m back on Tuesday.” Pearl hung up the phone before Joe could say another thing. She walked back into the living room feeling like a queen. She turned to Sam and said, “Now, where were we?”

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#### ABOUT THE ARTIST

Jennifer Lynn, or Chef as her friends call her because of her extensive culinary skill, has been an award-winning artist and illustrator for 40 years. She studied fine art at Wilfred Laurier University in Ontario Canada where she studied under 3 different artists in residence including the great Canadian Artist Michal Manson whom she studied under for 7 years. She then travelled extensively and developed key elements from many artists around the world. Today she has returned to Canada and has re-established her work in Ontario.

“I was thrilled when I was approached to paint the cover for this book... the backdrop of North Carolina is so rich in vistas and history and Robin’s writing is so incredibly beautiful and heartfelt the cover painting pretty much painted itself” – Jennifer Lynn , Artist

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Finding Home is JRobin Whitley's first book of fiction. Robin has written two non-fiction books prior to this novel. Her first book is a memoir. **In A Southern Closet** is the story of Robin's path toward reconciling her faith and her sexuality. Robin's second book is a collection of original poetry. **More Than Knowing** is available through Regal Crest books located at [www.regalcrest.biz](http://www.regalcrest.biz). Robin's work will soon be available on audiobook. For more information, please visit Robin's website at [www.jrobinwhitley.net](http://www.jrobinwhitley.net).

# FINDING HOME

*J. Robin Whitley*

A PLACE TO BELONG

In J. Robin Whitley's debut novel, the characters search for meaning in life and a place where all belong. A reminiscent mixture of *Fried Green Tomatoes* and *At Home in Mitford*, this novel portrays a loving sense of community and home. The rural North Carolina town of Pleasant Quarry becomes a place where all belong.



J. Robin Whitley

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